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For The Music

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theater, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing, Nonfiction

By

Grace Owen

B.A. Morehead State University, 2003

May 2007

To my parents,
who love me unconditionally despite the fact that I never became a lawyer!

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My girls back at home, thank you for sharing in the last twelve years of my life. My best memories of growing up include you all.

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My best friends, confidants and rocks—Jennifer, Kimberly and Olivia. I would be nowhere without you.

And of course, to Michael, for loving me with a love that's more than love . . .

Table of Contents

Abstract	vi
Preface	1
Going Solo	7
Beyond the Right Notes	19
Pleasing Dad	39
For the Music	57
Mr. Moore.....	72
Take a Seat.....	86
Fuck North Hardin	99
Vita.....	112

Abstract

For the Music is a collection of creative nonfiction essays chronicling nine years of my life from when I first discover music to playing in my high school marching band. The theme of the collection is coming of age, with each piece highlighting a particular lesson I struggle to learn based around my experiences with band. Such situations include overcoming shyness, accepting change, and discovering how to work with others.

Keywords: flute, marching band, Lafayette, music

Preface

When I finally decided on the subject of my thesis I called up my mom. It's going to be based around my experiences in music, I told her. She was apprehensive. Music? Like marching band? Yes. The whole idea was perfect; I had so much material to draw from. I was confident. But, she asked me, who will want to read about band?

Mom was not the last person to question my subject matter. In a society that's obsessed with such things as sports, sex, plastic surgery, and the latest technology, band seems a little, well . . . out of touch, and uninteresting to put it kindly. A person who has never played sports or who doesn't completely understand them might still read an article in *Sports Illustrated* or the newspaper if her local team makes it to the Super Bowl or NCAA basketball championship. This same person who has never played an instrument might not even know if her town has a high school marching band, much less read an article on it. People always wished me good luck on my project in a tone that suggested I was really, *really*, gonna need it.

Audience has been my biggest challenge when writing these essays. I didn't want to limit it to a particular group of people. I wanted my writing, despite my subject, to be available to and perhaps influential on everybody. But I wasn't sure how to do that. My first semester of graduate school I took a nonfiction class and wrote self-absorbed pieces that basically proclaimed, "Read all about me and my life. I'm soooooooooo interesting." My readers, however, did not necessarily find me soooooooooo interesting. (They didn't find me so interesting with one *o*.) Instead, they asked me bluntly, "Why should I be reading about this?" To write my thesis successfully I was going to need to learn to write outside of myself not only

for an audience of music-loving readers with marching band experience, but for everyone. So, before beginning I decided to ask myself the same question everyone was asking me: Why band?

Starting when I was ten years old and lasting until I was twenty I played in concert band, and later in marching band. Band was a part of my childhood and all of my adolescence. I was involved in band longer than any other sport or hobby, longer than my voluntary, extended education of college and graduate school, and longer than any romantic relationship—so far. My best friends were in band; my first kiss came from a saxophone player; one of my most inspirational teachers was my band director. I traveled to Disney World, the Georgia Dome and the Indianapolis Super Dome with band, sleeping on buses, cafeteria tables, and band room floors alongside other members. My experiences in, and because of band helped shape me during those influential years.

What I needed to write about, to connect this to the outside world, was *how* these experiences shaped me, and at the same time, how they were larger than I was.

As I sat down to write my first essay, “Going Solo,” on how I got started playing the flute, I thought about who I was before picking up an instrument, and how playing one became significant. What I ended up with was an essay on decision-making and independence. In this piece I write about how I share—and enjoy sharing—all activities with my sisters. But when I become interested in music and they don’t I struggle with whether to continue playing, unsure if I’ll like doing something by myself.

Looking back over the essay I realized I used music as a spring board to talk about a part of growing up. And suddenly I had my theme.

I was writing about coming of age: the lessons I learned and obstacles I faced from late

childhood to the beginning of adulthood at eighteen. All of the situations I write about involve a musical aspect, but they aren't confined to music.

Starting in sixth grade I had few friends and little self esteem, but I was a good flute player. "Beyond the Right Notes" expands the three years of middle school in which I equate my identity with how well I play the flute. When one of the "popular" girls plays better than I do I have to reevaluate not only my definition of music but of self.

Like "Going Solo," "Pleasing Dad" recounts a similar move toward independence. When I am a child my relationship with my dad exists solely around sports. When I have to choose between sports and band I resist the decision as long as I can. Normally, I would decide easily, unwilling to disappoint my parents—or more specifically my dad—and pick what makes them happy. But for one of the first times I begin to think about pleasing myself over my parents. "For the Music" continues this idea of self, but it's self in relation to others. Joining Lafayette's marching band I come across traditions I don't want to uphold and upperclassmen I don't get along with. To truly feel a part of the band I find I have to embrace both. I discover that despite disagreements or dislikes, the reason we all wear the uniform is the same.

Inspiration has come to me through parents, sisters and friends. But the first teacher to inspire me was my band director Mr. Moore. In the essay, "Mr. Moore" I recall the drive and dedication that defines Mr. Moore, who in turn, helps define the members of the band. His influence on me goes beyond the band field and his time as director.

With Mr. Moore's departure comes change, and that's the element I struggle with in "Take a Seat." I am unwilling to give up Mr. Moore's status in my heart and accept the new director. Not until disappointment and a confession of love for the band from the new director, Mr. Smith, do I begin to embrace my situation—the change that will continue to occur.

“Fuck North Hardin” is the last piece of the series, set during my senior year of high school—that transitional year when my actions then will help prepare me to or inhibit me from leaving home and setting off on a different path. Here I outline my continuing shyness that has kept me hesitant and somewhat antisocial. When I become section leader in the band I’m forced to deal with my shyness. The position allows me to sing and speak in front of others— situations that assist me with overcoming my shyness later in life.

Are these essays about music? Yes. Music is the one factor—the thread— that drives these pieces and that helped drive my life at that time. Are they about something more than music? Absolutely. It might be true that many people reading this have never attempted to defeat shyness by giving a speech in front of 250 band members. But everybody has fears, and most people have come across a situation where they are face-to-face with their fear. Everyone can read “Fuck North Hardin” and relate to the cramps in my stomach, the fidgeting, the stalling that happens when we are about to do something we’re afraid of. Not everyone can say she’s worried about disappointing her dad over whether to play in the band. But often we make decisions to please ourselves, knowing it’s not what someone important to us wants: marrying someone of a different religion, studying to be a painter instead of a lawyer, moving far from home. A person can read “Pleasing Dad” and understand the dilemma of wanting to make both yourself and someone you love happy. With each of these pieces, there’s a way to relate, to connect, to understand the process of growing up and the different situations life presents to us, even if the situations are presented through music.

Before beginning my thesis over two years ago I thought about band mostly in terms of the items I had in a box in the attic of my parents' house—my band memorabilia: photo albums, Friday night football schedules, itineraries, medals and patches from competitions, band programs with hearts drawn around the faces of cute boys, newspaper clippings, video tapes. This collection made up my band experience. Now, nearing the end of this project, I still have the box, but how I think about band goes beyond what's inside it. Band gave me opportunities to grow, to become outspoken, reliable, and hard working. As I chronicled my life in band I enjoyed noticing my development in the pages: myself as a nine-year-old who only wanted to do what my sisters were doing, until I let myself discover music independently of them; me at thirteen, self-conscious and hating art, learning to appreciate who I am and the influences of art in music; and my stubborn fifteen-year-old self who slowly begins to understand how to both hold on to and let go of the past during a marching season. I look over these pages fondly, knowing also that the influences band had on my life are themselves not confined—that others can read this and recall experiences of their own youth, and remember struggles and satisfactions that growing up brings.

Recently I handed in my completed thesis and I called my mom, wanting to share the news. So, what's it about again, she asked? Music, I said. Different experiences I had while in the band. It's sort of a coming of age thing, I told her, trying to keep the explanation simple. Well, she said—and I knew where she was going—I know I asked this before but do you think people will read about band?

I smiled, although she couldn't see me. I smiled for myself. "Yes, Mom. I think they will."

Going Solo

When my sisters and I were growing up, it was hard to tell us apart. We all had this outrageously blonde hair, light eyes, and tanned twig-like bodies. Because we are so close in age (only five years between the four of us) the height difference was subtle. If you didn't look closely—and people often didn't—you would think we were quadruplets. Often, when dressed in similar cotton tank tops or sweaters, our hair pulled back in ponytails, people would ask my mom this. It happened in grocery stores, at restaurants, and walking into church. Even my parents called us the wrong name occasionally. (My dad would get so frustrated sometimes he just snapped his fingers and said “You, come over here.”) We walked to elementary school together—all four of us—slept in the same bedroom, disliked the same vegetables, liked the same TV shows, and played the same sports.

Early on in her life my only older sister, Jennifer, (two years older in age, one year ahead in school), tried to break away from all the sister togetherness. She rigged a curtain line by her bed and threw a sheet over it.

“This is my area,” she told us. I'm guessing her hands were on her hips as they so often were when she was a child. “You all are not allowed to go past the curtain.”

When my mom dressed us all as M&Ms one Halloween Jennifer protested vehemently. In all the pictures from that year Jennifer can be seen in the corner, arms folded, a forced smile on her face, while the rest of us display wide, unconcerned grins, half unwrapped candy bars in our hands.

Later, my youngest sister would feel this same burning drive to establish herself as an

individual in the family, informing me—when she was a freshman, and I a senior in high school—that I was not allowed to go to Xavier University because she already decided she wanted to play soccer there. But as children, three out of four of us were content to be seen as the Owen Girls, perhaps me most of all. To me everything was more enjoyable when my sisters were included. I couldn't see why Jennifer wanted her own room—she wouldn't have anyone to talk to when Mom made us turn out the lights. I was confused when she walked behind us on the way to school—she wasn't able to link arms and skip to the impromptu songs we made up along the way. Even now I often wish my sisters were around to share in the trivial and significant parts of my life. In fact, I'm still not opposed to wearing the same costume for Halloween. Of course at twenty-five I have years of living, and enjoying, a separate life from my sisters. I no longer share a room with them; I don't even live in the same state. But prior to any other distinguishing factor, before I left Kentucky, before I went to college alone, or decided to continue playing tennis after my sisters quit, back further than when I became the only person in my family suspended from school, or had dreams of becoming an Olympic athlete, I started on my own path through music.

Music came by way of Maria.

Maria and her younger sister Misty lived across the street and six houses up. They moved onto Longview Drive the summer of 1990; the summer I turned nine. My older sister Jennifer and Misty, both eleven, became fast friends. Like most young girls, I looked up to and admired older females. Being that she was my only older sister, I felt this way about Jennifer. (My family tells me that when I learned to crawl I was constantly following her around the house.) One of my first memories of adoration came when I was five. I had to stay on the first

floor for kindergarten and she went to the second to join the rest of the first graders. She'd say goodbye and start walking up the stairs and instead of going to my classroom I'd watch her leave, stopping myself from running up along with her. I wanted to be where she was, wear the same clothes, join the same clubs. Have the same friends. So when she started making the walk up the street to play with Misty, I naturally wanted to follow.

But Jennifer, as was natural to her, didn't like having a shadow.

When I was eight my parents put us on the same soccer team. I could've stayed another year in my age group, but my parents, preferring to divide their time between three soccer teams rather than four, moved me up to play with Jennifer. I told Jennifer about Mom and Dad's decision while skipping around in the backyard, delighted by the opportunity to share soccer with her.

"Listen," she told me, "it's my soccer team and they are my friends. Don't try to make them yours."

I continued to skip, oblivious of her anger. "Why can't they be my friends too? We can share them."

"I don't want to share them," she shouted. "You have your own soccer team. I bet you asked Mom and Dad if you could be on mine."

I stopped moving. "No," I said, shaking my head and breathing hard. "Mom came and told me. But—."

"Why do you always have to do what I do?" she interrupted, and stomped off before I could answer.

Jennifer didn't want to share Misty either, but my parents threatened to ground her if she didn't let me go with her to Misty and Maria's house. And while Misty and I could've been

friends on our own, her loyalty was to Jennifer. Too often I had to ask to be included in their whispers. They'd design two-person games, and only let me have a turn if I went inside and got them both a glass of lemonade. Sometimes Maria joined us on the front porch, leading a game of Red Light, Green Light, or bringing out her stereo and making up dances for us.

Misty was always bothered by her older sister's presence. Maria was thirteen, but seemed to have skipped the awkward stage most adolescents have while their bodies adjust to puberty. With her olive skin, full lips, and thick, wavy black hair that came half-way down her back Maria was feminine and delicate. To add to her beauty, Maria's personality exuded confidence and gentleness. People were drawn to her, causing her to have many friends. Whenever she was around, Jennifer and I paid more attention to her than we did to Misty.

I think Jennifer mostly liked Maria because she was creative, and came up with games for us when we could think of none ourselves. But I liked Maria because she included me. She always picked me to be on her team, or let me roll first in a board game. Even when she was on her way out of the house she'd shout to Misty, "Whatever you're doing, you make sure to let Grace play!"

As the summer continued I was more likely to be inside with Maria than outside with Jennifer and Misty.

"Why do they ignore you?" Maria asked me one day in the kitchen.

She had just finished baking brownies and gave me the bowl to lick. I ran my fingers along the inside, scooping up all the batter I could get. "I don't know," I said, before popping my fingers in my mouth. "Jennifer doesn't want me to have her friends, I guess."

Maria's brow furrowed before she dipped her own finger into the leftover batter. "Well, I think you're great. Anytime I'm home you can always hang out with

me.”

The attention our siblings failed to give us— the adoration Jennifer failed to appreciate and what Misty failed to bestow—we gave to one another, and I began to look at Maria as an older sister.

Soon she was letting me borrow her nail polish, or her *Tiger Beat* magazines filled with full page photos of *New Kids on the Block* and Kurt Cameron. Up in her room—decorated with a pink and white ruffled bed spread and pillows—we watched movies or played cards.

One day, in her room, she pulled out a slender, black box and opened it. Inside, surrounded by blue velvet, were three shiny, silver pieces.

I leaned over it. “What is it?”

She giggled. “It’s a flute, silly.”

I had only seen a flute in pictures, and it looked different from what lay in the box.

Maria put it together.

My eyebrows shot up. “Oh, yes,” I said quickly, embarrassed that I didn’t recognize it sooner.

She held it out to me. “Here, take it.”

The flute, with its numerous keys, appeared complicated. I clutched it clumsily, my fingers around the middle, mashing down keys. I turned it horizontally and then vertically again, twisting my wrists around. Unsure of what to do next I passed it back to Maria. Her fingers, familiar with the instrument, rested gently on the keys.

“Do you want to hear me play it?” she asked, looking me in the eye as if no other question was as important as this one.

I nodded, pleased as always to be spending time with her, and sat cross-legged on the carpet. Shuffling through some papers, she picked out a song, then began.

In my short past I had banged out “Chopsticks” on an old piano; squeaked through “Three Blind Mice” on the recorder; sawed a bow over a violin once, but this was music of a different sort. The notes came out slow and sleek, each one like a perfectly shaped bubble rising slowly on an invisible current. Then suddenly they were fast and flittering—dozens of mini-hummingbirds popping out of the keys. I squinted; it seemed I could see the notes. They had color to them—a deep rose, a lemon yellow. The music pulsated throughout the room, and in a spiral motion, wrapped around Maria.

When she finished I half stood, my wild applause rocking me forward. I was flushed with a sudden love of music.

I can’t remember caring too much about anything musical before that moment. Other than the mentioned attempts at playing instruments required of me in music class and forgotten by me once class let out, I didn’t pay attention to that world. And in my family, there wasn’t much musical interest. One uncle could play some basic chords on the piano, and another took up the trumpet for a couple of years as a child. But all in all, I came from a long line of athletes. Musical scales, eighth notes, and tuning were concepts they didn’t know about. Perhaps because I was so close to my family and never saw any of them play an instrument I never had reason to be excited about one. Maria was sort of like family, or at least I wanted her to be, and when I saw her play, music took on a different dimension, and I wanted to know more.

She smiled in response to my clapping, almost embarrassed. “Would you like to try?”

I leapt to my feet. “Yeah!” She made it look so easy.

She sat on the bed, placing the flute beside her. By standing, my head was only a little above hers in this position. She turned her body squarely towards me and raised her arms. “Take your hands, and make two small Cs,” she instructed, doing the same with her own hands. “Now with your left hand, face the C towards you, and with you right, face it away from you.”

I complied.

“Now hold your hands horizontally. Put them at shoulder height, and out past your right shoulder.” She reached out and directed my hands to the exact position. “Good.” She slid the flute into them. “That’s how you hold it.”

I nodded, allowing my arms to get used to the awkwardness of the position. The flute felt suddenly heavy.

Maria leaned slightly back, examining my shoulders and the flute’s angle. After a moment she gave a short nod, looking satisfied. “I’ll teach you fingerings later. First, let’s see if you can make a sound. Bring the mouth piece up to your bottom lip Don’t cover up the hole Now blow.”

The mouthpiece had a very small hole, round and a little bigger than the cap of a pen. I took a deep breath and blew. Nothing. I looked up, confused.

“Don’t blow into the hole,” Maria said patiently. “Blow across it.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, wanting to show her I could do it. “Across, not down.” I puffed out my cheeks and let it fly, producing more spit than air.

Maria laughed and my face flushed. “What?” I whined. “What am I doing wrong?”

“Just try again. Only this time, purse your mouth. Like you’re about to kiss somebody.”

I had never kissed anyone but family, and so I stuck my lips way out.

“Not quite so much,” she said, her hand coming to my face. She placed her fingers on my jaw, applying slight pressure until I relaxed it. Then she squeezed my cheeks softly and she pulled out my bottom lip to where it stuck out, but just barely, her hands forming my mouth to its proper position. “Blow like you would on a bottle. Gently. Straight across.”

I tried again. A faint noise stirred from the flute.

“Almost, almost. Keep pushing the air across.”

Again. This time a tinny, hollow sound escaped. I looked at her wide-eyed. “I did it!”

She laughed softly. “Yes, good. Can you do it again?”

Another sound, similar to the first came out, meager, faint. It didn’t have the rich vibrant quality of Maria’s notes, but to me it was still satisfying.

My talk of Maria, and possibly Jennifer’s talk as well, didn’t go unnoticed by my parents. Soon after I started the fourth grade, whenever my parents went out they asked Maria to baby sit. My younger sisters Kimberly and Olivia enjoyed her almost as much as I did. While other sitters put in movies for us and then talked on the phone all night, or watched TV themselves and told us to go play outside, Maria interacted.

Once she even brought over her flute. The four of us sat on the living room couch while she played a few songs. Afterwards she asked if anyone wanted to try it.

“I do!” I said, waving my hand in the air. I had hoped I’d get another chance at playing it.

As before, I was only able to produce a minimal sound. But I remembered how to hold it, how to shape my mouth and blow across, and after only the second try I made a very flat, but very audible C. How much easier it all seemed this time.

“Any one else?” Maria asked.

My sisters shook their heads. The enchantment of the musical experience apparently stopped with me.

I shrugged and turned back to Maria. "Is it okay if I try it again then?"

Before she could answer my youngest sister Olivia spoke up, asking Maria to go outside. She and my other sisters wanted to build an obstacle course and they wanted her help.

Maria hesitated, looking at me. Finally she asked me if we could go outside now and play the flute again a little later.

No, I thought. I wanted to play now. I wanted everyone to sit in a circle and pass around the flute, and I wanted all of my sisters to get just as excited as me whenever they managed to push out a note. But their impatience was obvious, and I didn't want to be the reason we stayed inside. Besides, building an obstacle course was one of my favorite things to do, and Maria practically said yes to it already. I knew if I asked she'd probably let me play the flute by myself, but where was the fun in that? If nobody was around to listen to my progress, to encourage me and get excited with me, there didn't seem to be much point. It was like rigging my own bed sheet and secluding myself from my sisters and Maria, and that's not where I wanted to be.

"Okay," I said, handing her the flute back. "Let's go outside."

Long division and weekend soccer games kept me busy during the school year, and a new boyfriend kept Maria occupied during the summer. But there were still a few occasions when my fingers rested on the smooth flute keys, my lips against the cool nickel of the mouth piece, puckered in a musical kiss.

When the fifth grade started and I had a chance to join the band, I immediately wanted to do so. The concept of reading and playing music was mysterious, challenging, and ultimately appealing. But I mostly wanted to play so that I could have something to truly share with Maria. No one would ever mistake us as twins, but I believed if we both played the same instrument we'd be more like sisters.

That September day I rushed home and burst through the front door of my house. "I want to join band," I announced breathlessly to my mom.

She listened to me rave and told me finally she would talk to my dad about it. A beginning Armstrong flute cost 600 dollars, and my parents weren't well-off. The next day my parents sat me on the couch in the living room. Seated next to me they said they would agree to my joining the band if I practiced every day, if I took sole responsible for taking care of my flute and making sure I brought it to and from school, and I had to play for at least a year. I agreed to all these conditions with enthusiastic head nods and verbal confirmations.

Weeks later I found myself sitting in the band room, holding a brand new flute that was just a little too long for my arms. The keys were shiny, the body unmarred by scratches or dents. Still, I kept taking a rag and polishing it, running my hands over the smooth surface. In time, I'd grow to love the rusted, rubbed down areas where my fingers gave so much attention and the rough, scarred texture where it had been set on blacktops during band camps, and bounced around on buses to competitions. The marks of commitment. But then, the flute's beauty came from its physical flawlessness.

My sisters didn't care about my gleaming, new instrument; nor did they accept my decision to join band as readily as my parents had.

“You’ve joined the what?” Kimberly asked me. We were walking to school, acorns snapping under our feet.

“The band,” I said proudly, holding up my flute case. I could’ve managed to fit it in my backpack but I wanted everyone in school to see that I now played an instrument.

“Are you quitting soccer?” Olivia asked me.

“No. Why would I do that?”

“Well, why would you join band?” Kimberly said, perplexed.

Although I was too stubborn to admit it then, I probably would’ve quit soon after I started if it wasn’t for Maria. Playing during band class with other musicians was one thing, but when I got home and shut myself in my parents’ room to practice, I noticed how solitary music could be. I would be working on the latest fingerings, while my sisters were outside, playing a game of Horse, or in the living room, watching their favorite cartoons. I could hear the bang of the basketball against the backboard through the window, their voices cheering one another on in the distance; or I’d listen to the muffled noise of the TV through the door and then their simultaneous laughter. On those days when Maria wasn’t around, the flute almost became a burden. I enjoyed playing, that wasn’t the issue. But I enjoyed playing more when I had someone to share it with—the other people in band, and mostly Maria. When it was just me, alone in my parents’ room, I wanted to practice as quickly as possible so that I could go out and join my sisters in whatever they were doing, even other homework. At least we all had math problems to do.

For Christmas that year I tried to organize a surprise concert for my parents. The idea was for my sisters to sing carols as I played the flute. But halfway through our third practice, my sisters decided to quit. Olivia whined that it was boring and my other sisters quickly agreed.

Jennifer suggested that since this was my idea, why didn't I just play for Mom and Dad? I was naïve to think that when they showed no interest in the flute they still might want to sing along with it.

Maria made time to listen to my latest piece, sometimes even joining in. When I told her about my Christmas concert idea she became excited, even helping me pick songs to play. More than just another musician, she was a flute player in band. She taught me an alternate fingering to B flat (that I wouldn't learn about in music class until the eighth grade). She gave me the latest flute catalogues from Don Wilson Music, where I flipped through pages of open-hole flutes and others with gold mouth pieces. Talking about or playing the flute with Maria was also a way I could bond with her, like giggling with Jennifer over our crush on the tennis pro Andre Aggasi; or watching a Michigan basketball game with Kimmy in hopes of seeing Chris Webber or Jalen Rose dunk.

Things continued like this throughout the year, but when I entered the sixth grade Jennifer and Misty had a falling out. I still don't know all the details behind it, only that it was Misty who stopped talking to Jennifer. The whole thing was so bad my mom forbade me to see Maria. My loyalty, she reminded me, was to my sister. I wasn't on Misty's side and I acted like I didn't know her in school after she stopped talking to Jennifer, but my reasoning was that Maria had nothing to do with the situation. I argued that I only wanted to have someone to show off my latest flute technique to. Mom would not be persuaded. If the situation was reversed, she told me, I would want Jennifer to do the same. My neighborhood older sister was gone. Music became solitary.

I stayed with the flute that second year more out of obligation to my parents. Yet the experience was still a challenge I enjoyed taking, and there was a deep, throbbing satisfaction whenever I noticed myself improving, but I wondered how much fun it could ultimately be without Maria. I continued though, and in the months that followed I began to see that I didn't need my sisters, or Maria to enjoy music. Later I would try to get Jennifer to join marching band by being a color guard member but when she said no I didn't mind. Marching band would've been fun with her, but it was fun without her too. I've said that about many things in my life now: If my sisters could have been with me at college, or a concert, or a party, or a play we would've had a great time together. But their absence from these events didn't stop me from having a great time either. Music helped me see that.

Around Christmas of my sixth-grade year, two months after I had last spoken to Maria, I was practicing my flute in Mom and Dad's room when Jennifer came in. I continued playing, used to having either of my parents walk in to put away laundry or grab a pair of shoes. She went past me to Mom's closet, probably looking for a shirt to borrow.

After some rummaging around she shut the closet and turned towards me. "I recognize that," she said.

I stopped playing, slightly startled. "Yeah, it's *Ode To Joy* . . . I have a concert coming up."

"Oh. You still first chair?"

"I am," I said, surprised that she knew the term. Neither she nor any of my sisters had shown any interest when I explained the concept of chairs to them.

"Well, you sound good."

"Thanks," I exclaimed, unable to suppress a smile.

[section break]

Olivia took up chorus in middle school, but none of my sisters ever played an instrument, nor did they pass up opportunities to tease me, or express their disbelief over my being in the band. But eventually they began to support me. Kimberly and Olivia sat for hours in the cold to watch me perform in high school, even coming to a college show, and Jennifer bought me flowers and cards. They knew the name of my directors, and asked about my practices. They each even attempted to play the flute a couple of times for me, much to my entertainment.

In the seventh grade, Misty and Maria moved. I was in my third year of playing the flute, practicing daily as I promised my parents I would, and turning into one of the better players in my school. I auditioned and made All-County Band in my seventh and eighth grade years. I performed in the annual Solos and Ensemble Contest, and even had a solo at one of our last concerts in eighth grade. I almost forgot there was a time when the instrument in my hands had felt foreign, and the producing of notes had been a struggle. Maria became a memory too, and music became its own inspiration.

Beyond the Right Notes

Early on, I struggled with art. In kindergarten I was always one of the last to finish our daily coloring activity because I'd go outside the lines and have to redo it. Once, in the first grade, before some cut-and-paste project, my teacher stood in front of the room, saying, "Everyone's going to try really hard to cut on the lines this time. Right, Grace." Her eyes bored into me. I was having difficulty cutting at all, much less on the lines, and had resorted to tearing, hoping my teacher wouldn't notice. My skill never did develop.

In middle school we went from cutting and coloring to sculpting and shading. My vases came out lopsided and finger-indented, and my sketching consisted of black and blacker, with no range of gray. I might have been able to dismiss my inability to create anything recognizable if I weren't being graded on it. I didn't care that the clay turtle I made in the sixth grade came out flat and painted like a patchwork quilt. I cared that I put effort into it and my teacher, Mrs. Dressman, gave me a B.

"It's not fair," I whined, to my only friend Rachel. I slung my backpack over my shoulder as we walked the hallway to our bus. "I did all the work. Just 'cause Mrs. Dressman doesn't like my turtle doesn't mean it's not good. How can you really say if something is good anyway? It's art! Isn't that the point?"

I preferred the exactness of things. That two plus two always equaled four. That George Washington was the first president of the United States. I knew I could study these things, and they never changed. Even the sports I played—soccer, basketball, tennis and swimming—were precise. A free throw always counted as one point. None of the opinionated judging and scoring

systems of diving and gymnastics. So when I took up the flute in the fifth grade, I applied this same literal outlook.

Playing each note perfectly made you a good musician. I played the flute in the same nose-to-the-grindstone, all-or-nothing manner I'd perform in a soccer game, or in my studying for a science test. I practiced more than the required days and minutes, I looked ahead in the book and learned new fingerings, I even rigorously polished my flute, believing that if it looked good, it would sound good. Art was a required class and I left its abstract, creative notions behind me after I walked out the door. Music, in my outlook, was either played right or it was played wrong; no shades of gray like those I had been unable to produce in art class. If you played all the notes correctly, or if you got more notes correct than the person sitting next to you did, you were better. The best.

From the moment I took up the flute I wanted to be the best.

Band in the fifth grade proved to be unchallenging. Not that I was a flute-playing, child prodigy and lost forty-five minutes of my young life twice a week from sitting in with a bunch of beginners. More in the sense that there wasn't a way for me to show my teacher (and the other students) how good I was. We all received an A if we played the required number of days and minutes each week and had our parents sign our practice sheets. But you could lie about those! There were no tests that graded my actual performance, no form of competition that let me win. This changed in the third week of middle school though.

Packing up after class, the band director, Mrs. Hawkins tapped her baton against the side of the music stand. "Okay, everyone," she shouted, her thin arms waving for silence, her nasal

voice straining to be heard over the noise, “listen up. Next week we’re going to have a playing test.”

I felt a warm flush all over my body. I didn’t know what playing test meant, but it sounded like the challenge I had been waiting for since first entering the band.

“It’s not a big deal,” she went on. “I’m just going to have you individually play for me a few bars from one of the songs we’ve been working on.” People began shuffling about, nervous about playing by themselves. “No one else will hear you,” she assured us, her voice casual. “You’ll go into the practice room and I’ll listen to you play. And then I’ll put you in chairs. The person who plays the best will sit first chair. The person who plays the second best, will be second chair, and so on down from there.”

She paused and I tried unsuccessfully to hide my smile. Somebody got to sit first. Somebody got to be the best, and everyone else would know it. Finally, after all my practicing I would get to prove myself.

“You’ll have plenty of time to work on it,” Mrs. Hawkins continued, her voice still raised. “I’ll tell you tomorrow what I’m going to have you play.”

I practiced the selected part for a solid week. I made my mom, as well as my protesting sisters, (who knew nothing and cared nothing about band), listen to me play. I pretended they were Mrs. Hawkins.

“Now, don’t say anything to me,” I’d instruct whomever I could manage to grab. “Just listen and maybe, if you want to, pretend to write some stuff down from time to time.” All my sisters rolled their eyes at this, but my mom nodded.

I sat them on the couch and then positioned my music stand a few feet in front of them, making sure it wasn't off balance on the rug. Bringing the flute to my lips I'd take it down, always adding one thing. "Oh yeah, when I'm done, you can say good job or something. But that's it!"

When I finally walked into the practice room to play for Mrs. Hawkins I had the music memorized.

The practice room was off the far left of the band room. Whether it actually contained bad lighting, I remember it as being dark. It had the same thin, gray carpeting that was in the band room and was big enough to hold about fifteen people. Although on the day of my playing test it felt smaller, and there didn't seem to be any air circulating inside it.

The notes came out heavy and long, as if my fingers were burdened by weights, and I couldn't lift them off the keys in a fast motion. Yet despite the slow tempo, I played the music almost perfectly. Even though I knew Mrs. Hawkins wouldn't say much, and I had prepared myself for that through my family's lack of responses, her "thank you" caused a stab of panic in me. Surely, I thought, if I had done better she would've been unable to hold back her praises. Another agonizing week went by before I came into band class and the results were there, written on a yellow piece of paper taped to one of the music stands.

Trying to act blasé, I waited behind other people for a space to clear. When I stepped forward I noticed Mrs. Hawkins had each section underlined and I found *Flutes* on the top left. *Grace Owen*. There was my name, at the top of the list with a 1). beside it. I made first chair.

I walked to the front, my hands shaking, and sat down without looking at any of the other flutes. Lindsay, a cute, brown-haired cheerleader, was second chair.

"Congratulations," she told me sincerely.

I smiled faintly. “Oh, thanks,” I tried to keep my tone casual while inside I was break dancing. “Same to you. Good job.” I meant it. Kind of.

I hadn’t made friends with any of the other flute players. In fact, I only really had one friend in the sixth grade. I had come to Jessie Clark a week after everyone else—my family having booked a cabin in North Carolina for the week school started. Immediately, in those precious five days of beginning a new school, people had formed cliques, setting up a social structure that would change very little in the next three years. When I saw my best friend from elementary school, Laura, in one of my classes I rushed over to her, relieved to see a familiar face, and ecstatic that it was hers. She barely spoke to me. The next day as the dismissal bell rang she handed me a note telling me she had three new best friends. I folded the piece of paper and walked the halls without seeing anyone. *But I only missed a week.*

Besides being absent for the crucial forming of social cliques, I was going through what adults labeled as an “awkward” phase. I had glasses— with pink frames no less. My teeth were all over the place in my mouth (I’d get braces the summer before my eighth grade year). My hair was so blonde it looked almost white and I had yet to discover the taming power of mousse for my curls. Names like *Albino* and *Cotton Ball* were commonly used in my presence. I didn’t even need a bra when I entered middle school, which made changing in gym class unnerving. Normally I wouldn’t have taken so much notice of my physical features (I certainly don’t today. I rarely wear makeup and sometimes leave the house without combing my hair). But somewhere between fifth and sixth grade, boys and girls started dating.

I had my fair share of crushes, but boys didn’t date girls like me. Boys dated girls like Lindsay. Girls with long, shiny hair, and eyelashes that were thick and curled because they already knew how to apply mascara. Girls whose teeth filled in nicely and who had started to fill

out nicely as well. Cheerleaders. No one even knew I played a sport since the sports weren't affiliated with the school and I couldn't show up wearing my soccer uniform.

In middle school I didn't blend in. I disappeared. The only place I felt I had any identity was in the band room. So first chair was more than just my overly competitive side satisfied. First chair was me.

My sixth grade year progressed with little change—except that Thomas, the boy whose locker was above me, got a girlfriend and they would be necking between every class period, their tangled legs blocking my entrance into my locker. Every few hours I was mumbling “Excuse me,” while trying to ignore the sound of wet, inexperienced kisses above me. Other than that though I was still writing out book reports for English, conjugating verbs in French class, and hating every minute of art.

“What is that?” Rachel asked me on the bus, pointing to a piece of paper I held on my lap.

“It's a painting.” Parts of the paper were still wet, even though I finished working on it five hours beforehand.

“Of what?” Her question was genuine, even excited. She probably thought it was some sort of abstract piece.

We were working with watercolors at the time and the assignment had been to paint a picture, any picture we wanted, that represented some emotion. The idea behind it being to manipulate color to produce the desired emotion. I painted a sunset over the mountains, trying to capture *serenity*. But I used a bit too much water with my color and everything ended up bleeding all over the page. The mountains became big black circles and the rays of the sun

mixed together to form a grayish-green smudge that took over the rest of the picture. So much for *serenity*; more like *chaos*.

When I told Rachel what the picture actually was her face registered the eyebrows-raised-surprise-look that always followed my art explanations.

“It’s nice,” she said quietly after a couple of minutes.

“It’s crap.” I fought the urge to crumple it up. “Mrs. Dressman stinks as a teacher. She never even helps. She just sits at her desk and does I don’t know what. If she gets up at all it’s to talk to her favorite students. I wish I didn’t have to take this stupid class. Why can’t I just have two hours of band?”

Band continued to be my sanctuary. Although I was ignored when repeatedly trying to break up the slobbering couple so I could get into my locker and looked over for those who blended rather than smeared their paint, I held my first chair position throughout sixth grade. Every day when I walked into the band room, I got to sit ahead of all the other flute players. I didn’t have a boyfriend or even a 4.0 g.p.a. and I still couldn’t cut a straight line, but with each note I played right, I was the better flute player. Holding on to that notion got me through my first year of middle school.

Seventh grade didn’t start out much better than sixth. My one friend, Rachel, wasn’t in any of my classes. Sloppy kissing Thomas was still with his girlfriend and they continued to make out against the locker above mine. Worse yet, I once more had Mrs. Dressman as my art teacher. On our first project—making prints from different fabrics—I received a C. To get a clear print we had to roll just the right amount of ink on the fabric. It was especially important to

keep the paper very still when pressing it against the ink and fabric. I managed to fail miserably at both these important steps. My prints came out ink-soaked and blurry.

“You used too much ink,” Mrs. Dressman told me. She stood as if smoking a cigarette, one hand on her hip, the other raised close to her face. She looked at my picture with such disgust that I had no doubt if she had been smoking she would’ve exhaled right on my paper.

Luckily band was immediately after art. I’d rush out of Mrs. Dressman’s room and into band, feeling relaxed and confident for the first and only time during the day. Here I was in my element. I could practice the latest John Philip Sousa march at home until my fingers never messed up on a note. There wasn’t any mixing of paint or rolling of ink or shaping of clay here. Only one note following the other, and because I had those down I thought I had it all.

The first playing test of the year in which I once again got first chair furthered my confidence. Lindsay, as she had the year before, remained second. But I ignored her as I had always done. She was pretty and popular and I was not. In the social world of middle school we were opposites, which didn’t necessarily make us enemies, but it didn’t help us to be friends. To me, as probably to any child feeling on the outside, Lindsay had everything once we left the band room. But inside I had first chair. And my silence was a way of reminding her of that.

In January of my seventh-grade year Mrs. Hawkins announced the upcoming auditions for All County Band. All County Band is what it sounds like—a band made up of musicians from all over the county. In my case, Fayette County, Kentucky. Music is passed out to the schools according to grade level, along with a set of scales. On a select night, you go to one of the middle schools, sign up for a time, and play the music and scales for not one, but three people. It’s basically a playing test on a grander level. A swimming competition had kept me

from trying out the year before, but nothing stopped me from auditioning in seventh grade, and I was determined to make it. To be the best, I had to play the best.

The auditions took place in early February and the very next day the results were known. Mrs. Hawkins had a list of all those who made it from Jessie Clark, and posted it in her usual spot. *Flutes*: There were only two names there. One of them was mine, with a number twelve next to it. I was simultaneously excited and disappointed. Over forty flutes had auditioned and they picked me. But twelfth chair? How many flutes did they take anyway? Then I saw Lindsay's name, and beside it, a number four. My head began pounding. She got fourth chair? Could that be right?

I walked with my head down to the front of the room, and sat numbly. The whole class period I waited for Mrs. Hawkins to announce that it was really me, not Lindsay, who got fourth chair. She had never beaten me in a playing test before. I was the better player.

"I just wanted to say," Mrs. Hawkins began, putting her baton down as the class came to a close, "congratulations to all those that made All County Band. I'm very proud of each of you."

She seemed to pause and I stared at her intently, hoping to catch her eye. Here was the part, I believed, where she followed with *There has, however, been a mix up in the flute section. Grace, you will actually be sitting fourth chair. Lindsay, you are twelfth. Sorry about any confusion this may have caused you two.* Mrs. Hawkins just smiled though and said she'd see us tomorrow.

Lindsay turned to me as we were packing up, and just as sweetly as she had the first time, congratulated me on making All County. I didn't reply, just nodded and got up out of my seat so she wouldn't see the beginning of tears in my eyes.

If anybody, ANYBODY, had to beat me at the flute, I didn't want it to be Lindsay!

Why couldn't it have been shy Sarah? Or dorky Jimmy? Someone on the same rung of the social ladder as me? Having one of them beat me was something I could justify, because victories for people like us were rare. Lindsay didn't need the victory though. If I had played every note right and she still beat me, then maybe I wasn't as good as I thought I was. And if I wasn't that good, then what did I have?

During one of the breaks on that Saturday before the All-County concert Lindsay came to the front of the practice room where I stood alone and started talking to me. She chatted easily about the music we were playing, our director, even the classes we had back at our own middle school, which at this point seemed like a distant universe. It was the longest we had ever talked to one another. Only one other time would we ever have a conversation of more than just a few words, and that would be late in our senior year of high school.

But this particular time, while Lindsay seemed carefree about music and life as a whole, I wanted to break down. Maybe I would have excused myself, ignored her, or even answered in sarcastic tones if I hadn't felt the lesson of my parents pushing down on me, telling me to treat people nicely. I swallowed hard.

"Hey, I meant to tell you—great job on getting fourth chair." I shifted from one foot to the next as I talked. "That's really good."

"Thanks," she said sweetly. She was standing still, her hands clasped loosely in front of her, looking as natural and relaxed as I was uncomfortable. "I don't know what happened. You're better."

My mouth dropped open a little as my rocking stopped, and I realized I couldn't look at her. "Oh," I said, fumbling with my words, "that's not true. You're good. Like, seriously good. I mean." I gestured around the room, keeping my eyes fixed on the percussionists tuning bells in the back, "Obviously."

"Well, so are you."

"Yeah," I said, nodding too much. "I know."

I had no idea. It never occurred to me that I could think of myself as good without sitting in the first chair spot. And, I couldn't believe other musicians would think of me that way either. But there was Lindsay, perfect Lindsay, sitting eight chairs ahead of me, telling me I was just as good as she was. I was confused.

Lindsay's words went deep inside me, setting off a gong, and the vibrations shook me awake. Not quite at that instant (although I did spend the rest of All County concentrating on my playing and trying hard to fight the urge to look at those ahead of me with jealous disgust, wondering how they sounded,) but slowly, in a rippling effect, the vibrations gave me a wide-eyed, clearer perception of my musical ability.

Somewhere I had always known I was good. There was no musical talent in my family, I didn't have the help of private lessons, and I would never play on an open-holed flute (a more expensive instrument on which the holes in the keys allow for more variations on notes). For the ten years I played in school, I would do so on the same beginning flute, in marching and concert season. The nickel would be rubbed down from the constant wear, and there would be small scratches and dings from being set down and sometimes accidentally kicked on the blacktop during band camp, and the flux of rain and heat and freezing winds of marching season would

take a toll on the sound. But by my senior year I would sit first chair in the most advanced of Lafayette's three concert bands, and I'd get there playing that flute.

I had the talent and I had the drive, and when I finally figured it out by the end of my seventh-grade year, I felt empty. So I was good? For some reason I wasn't satisfied with that any longer. Music wasn't enough in defining me, nor was it enough just to get it right.

The transition happened so casually, so spontaneously and almost without effort that I didn't notice it until the first day of lunch my eighth-grade year. I had made friends in band. Flute players even. The year before, without Rachel in my classes, I was left best-friendless once again. The band room, my sanctuary, chipped away at some of my shyness, allowed me to at least look at and greet those who sat in there with me day after day. And then I started to see them in my other classes. Whitney Shrout—a trumpet player. Amy Storer—a clarinetist. Shauna Earles—a flautist. By the end of seventh grade I was eating lunch with Shauna, and days before school started our eighth-grade year I was on the phone with Kelley Webster, another flute player, to see if we had any classes together. So when lunchtime came eighth grade year, Kelley and I sat chatting idly about our summer, our siblings, growing out our hair. Topics that included band, but not just band. Kelley, like Shauna, was more than just the one-dimensional competitor I had created her to be in my head. She was a person. A flute-playing person who was also my friend.

That summer, as well, sitting on a giant trampoline at Whitney's thirteenth birthday party, I kissed a boy. It's hardly worth calling a kiss now and certainly even then I was disappointed in it. All those expectations. But that kiss, such as it was, made me feel like I had earned a patch,

an invisible one I wore on my arm that gave me that extra boost I needed to talk to guys and to include them at least in my list of acquaintances if not friends.

I even had a top locker. And Tom and his girlfriend had split up.

Eighth grade was a sharp right in my otherwise, flat, straight-ahead middle school road that had so far defined me. My social life was developing, and so at last, was my body. The year hinted of change, but included in that was my outlook on music. I didn't know how to approach it. I still wanted to play but ever since my revelation during All-County my theory on how to play, on what good music was, no longer existed. If the whole idea behind music was more than just playing the right notes, what else did it include? And how to play that?

Sitting in home room on the first day of classes, however, I momentarily forgot about my dilemma over music.

"Oh, man," I said, looking over my schedule as I talked to Kelley. "I forgot all about art class. I can't believe I have to take it again. Why?" I shook my schedule, waving it in the air as if the art requirement might just slip off the page. "Why do I need three years of this? It's an elective. Aren't you supposed to be able to pick those? I swear if Mrs. Dressman gives me a B again"

Kelley leaned over my schedule, her auburn hair falling over her face. "You don't have Mrs. Dressman this year. You have Mrs. Lynn*." Even unintentionally, Kelley's voice was soothing. It had a breezy, caring pitch to it, as if sunshine lived in her vocal chords.

I stopped my ranting and looked at the schedule, suddenly calm. "What? Really? Huh . . . Well maybe she'll give me an A."

Mrs. Lynn appeared to be younger than the other art teacher. She had short, blonde hair that she sometimes covered with a hat. Her shirts hung loosely over her small frame, and she

always had paint or clay on them. She didn't just assign you art projects, she got in there with you and made them.

One of our first assignments was to take a two-liter bottle and make a person out of it. To get the essential facial and body features, as well as clothing, we were to use bits of newspaper that we soaked in plaster. After everything was set, we were to paint it. Mrs. Lynn was nothing if not encouraging, walking around the room, giving suggestions, helping to get a piece of hair to stick. We had a week to do the assignment, and we were allowed to take it home if necessary. Most students left their coke-bottle person there. Mine went home with me every day.

By the end of the week I had barely finished and turned it in, feeling defeated. My coke-bottle person had hair that looked like bad dreads, giant breasts that were lopsided, and a painted-on UK sweatshirt on which the paint had run and the K looked more like a B. *The University of Boobs.*

Art was proving once again not to be my forte.

Mrs. Lynn stopped me after class. "You worked hard on this?" It was a question, although in her own kind voice, nurturing and soothing like Kelley's, it came out as a statement of confirmation.

"I did." I wanted to cry. I looked at my coke-bottle person I had named Elizabeth and I thought she was beautiful. A raw sort of beauty from a girl who couldn't cut a straight line, whose work was always sort of crooked, but still patient and thoughtful.

"I'm going to show it at open house on Tuesday."

"You are?" For a second I thought she was mocking me. Telling me she was going to hold my creation up in front of thirty parents and explain how this was not art while they all laughed.

“I am.” She looked me in the eye. “I could see your effort in class. I saw you take it home with you every day. And look, you did a wonderful job.”

I looked at Elizabeth again, and saw only her flaws. “Umm, her, uh.” I blushed. “Well, her boobs are, uh . . . lopsided.”

“Art isn’t about being perfect, Grace. It’s beauty as we see it.”

I stared at her, confused.

“Okay,” she said, laughing. “Maybe you didn’t mean to make her chest crooked, but it doesn’t mean that this is any less art because of it. It could be intentional. How you see yourself, or mankind as a whole—a little off center.”

“Yeah, alright,” I said slowly, understanding only some of what she was saying. “But to me it wasn’t intentional. I was trying to make things even. I’m just no good at art, Mrs. Lynn! I don’t get it, and I don’t like it.”

“What do you mean you don’t like it? You’re in band, aren’t you? Music is art.”

I didn’t respond. All I could think of to say was “Nu uh,” and that didn’t seem appropriate.

“Art is expression. It’s how we think and feel and see. It’s capturing love or hate, in a painting, in a sculpture. In a symphony.” She said the last part with more force.

I blinked rapidly. Music as art? I had dreaded the notion of art so much, confined it to a class that would only lower my g.p.a. Saw it only in the form of lines and angles, paintings I could never mix, clay I could never shape.

There was a glint in her eyes as she spoke again. “What did you think you were playing? Notes?”

[section break]

“You have a beautiful sound,” Mr. Moore told me one Monday morning. Mr. Moore was the head director at Lafayette High School and would come over to Jessie Clark and work with the eighth graders, usually practicing with a specific section but occasionally directing our band. In my memories he is only at the middle school a few times, yet his quiet, but commanding demeanor remains clear. He had a sincerity and intensity about him whenever he stepped up on the podium. He captivated—and simultaneously terrified—me.

“Do you take private lessons?” He was sitting to the right of me, wearing black trousers and a gray turtleneck, with his left leg propped on his right knee. The clothing and stance that I’d come to know to be so typical of him—alert but relaxed, confident in his confidence.

“No,” I said, too shy to meet his eye. “Never.”

“Well, you must practice a lot.”

“Yes.” I couldn’t make myself utter anything but one-word answers.

Mr. Moore didn’t give out compliments easily. If that wasn’t obvious within the first half hour of meeting him, the stories passed down through older siblings confirmed it. He was a hard ass, in the most respectable sense. He loved music. And if you weren’t serious about it, he wasn’t serious about you.

He set his left foot down and leaned toward me. “I can’t wait to have you at Lafayette.” The words were hushed, meant only for me to hear. “You’ll do well there.”

My skin tingled and I finally met his eye. “Thank you. I can’t wait to be there.” A rush of excitement hit me then and I wanted to get home and practice—work on my sound, make it better. Sustain this beauty. This . . . art? I hadn’t forgotten Mrs. Lynn’s words, yet up until then I couldn’t see how they might actually hold true.

I had a solo that year at school (maintaining as ever, my place in first chair). One day, when Mr. Moore again had the flutes in the practice room we were working on that specific piece and I played it, my stomach trembling as I did so, wanting more than ever to make a good impression on him.

“Have you ever tried using vibrato,” he asked me later.

I looked at him questioningly. “Uh, no.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“No.” I was still having trouble getting my bearings around him.

He smiled easily. “I’ll have Tara show you.”

Tara Sparks was our student teacher that semester. A petite woman, with a mass of curly brown hair and big eyes, she had a bubbly energy to her. And in the practice room, she taught me how to use vibrato.

Vibrato—the pulsing of a note. Whereas before, my notes came out even and straight, now they were flushed, rounder. The vibrato caused waves of musical pleasure, sliding one note into the next, or sustaining it, causing it to expand even after you stopped playing.

“Yes, that’s it,” Tara said to me one afternoon. “Can you hear how much richer your sound is?”

I nodded enthusiastically.

“That will really help make your solo more beautiful.”

Beautiful. Mr. Moore had said it and now Tara. The idea was spreading in me, not unlike the warmth one feels from drinking hot apple cider after being in the snow. I had always tried to play the notes with expression, but driving me was the exactness of it all. Playing every little thing so correctly that the emotion got lost and the notes were dry. Now this sound, this

vibrato, this creation. The purpose that I lacked in the summer. The very thing Mrs. Lynn told me in her classroom.

I looked at Tara eagerly, and asked if we could try again.

When I worked on my solo at home I closed my eyes; I wanted to feel the notes. Mrs. Lynn talked about music being art, and Mr. Moore expressed music as being beautiful, and to do that, it had to come alive.

I wasn't trying any longer to just play eighth notes and whole notes perfectly. I was trying to evoke fear, stir up passion, bring about happiness, recall sadness. I was trying to create beauty. And in doing so, I realized I truly enjoyed playing.

When I walked into All County Auditions that year I took a deep breath and realized I wasn't nervous. For the first time I wasn't playing in an attempt to beat out anybody, in an effort to carve out an identity based in exactness of playing and the number of a chair. I just wanted to play music, play it well, as always, but play it to enjoy it.

"Start on bar five," said a bored male voice from behind a screen.

"Beautiful," I whispered to myself before beginning.

I messed up twice, two wrong notes that were no more than slips, undetectable to the untrained ear. But I knew and the judges knew.

"How'd it go?" my dad asked me as we walked out into the pitch black, February night.

"Great," I told him, smiling honestly. "I messed up a little, but I did great." I had never felt so good about an audition.

The next day a list was in the band room, and my name was among the selected students. Beside it was a number three. From twelfth chair to third. A huge smile broke out on my face

and I spontaneously clapped my hands. I had expected to make it. Something inside me told me I would, but I didn't think I'd place so high. Lindsay's name wasn't up there. She hadn't even auditioned. I didn't know that then, nor did I know she had already decided not to join band in high school.

"Congratulations," Lindsay told me as I sat down.

"Thank you." I meant it. Completely. We still weren't friends. Never would be. But I was done competing with Lindsay and all the other Lindsays I'd meet in high school. I didn't see her life as the perfect one, the one I was trying to have. So I hadn't kissed any more boys at that point and she had had a boyfriend. So my soccer uniform would never look as cute as her cheerleading one. So she might or might not be a better flute player than I was, depending on the day. I was still pretty damn good, and I knew that, with practice, I could develop myself into an even better player. Maybe an artist.

And I wanted that far more than sloppy kisses against someone else's locker.

Pleasing Dad

At the age of eleven I decided I wanted to become an Olympic swimmer. Early in the summer, before my dreams of Olympic gold, my parents had signed my three sisters and me up to be on our neighborhood swim team. None of us had expressed any sort of interest in swimming, nor were we enthusiastic once we found out, but I didn't try to change or even fight my parents' decision. Defying Mom and Dad was a concept I wouldn't even think about until years later when they refused to extend my curfew. I had, what my only oldest sister termed the Suck Up Syndrome. If Mom told us we could only have two cookies I obediently took two, while my sisters snuck back in the kitchen, snatching a third or fourth. When Dad told us to clear the table or fold the laundry I set about it immediately while my sisters looked for excuses to stall. I never thought of it as sucking up, I just wanted to please my parents, make them happy. So, when they told us we were joining the swim team, I didn't participate in my sisters' protest—ready as always, to do what I knew my parents wanted of me.

My sisters and I were self-taught swimmers, which meant that while we knew how to stay afloat in twelve feet of water, the art of the butterfly stroke was beyond us. In practice, putting together the up and down kick, and the left arm over, right arm over pull of the backstroke, I started to swim sideways. A flip turn (a forward flip that lets you push off the wall with your feet from underwater), always ended with me rushing to the surface in a coughing fit, water having gotten into my nose. And diving was out. Attempting it once in practice is the only time I can remember being afraid of the water. The lack of ease in executing the strokes caused

me great frustration. Plus, unlike sweat, the scent of chlorine soaked into the skin. So even when I wasn't near the pool I always smelled like I just hopped out. Swimming also caused the strangest sensation. Constantly you are submerging yourself in the silence of the water and then quickly bringing yourself out of it for air, your ears filled with instant, muffled, chaotic noise before you plunge back into the silence. It's like beginning to meditate and then being shaken by the shoulders over and over again. I couldn't quite get used to the experience.

But despite the aggravation, the constant chemical smell, and the adjustment to my senses, as July unfolded I started to improve. So much so that I actually started placing at swim meets. Mostly I was taking home third place ribbons in the butterfly and breaststroke. But I'd get some second place ribbons and the occasional, sacred, blue first place ribbon in the freestyle and backstroke. These flimsy Parks and Recreational awards stirred the competitive spirit in me. Before, my thoughts remained blank as I swam laps during practice, but now they were a continuous stream of encouragement. *Kick, kick, kick. Come on, pull. Reach, reach. One more stroke before you breathe. Another. Another.* Blue ribbons were constantly right behind my eyelids. On days when my dad didn't pick us up till later, and my sisters jumped off the diving boards and dove for pennies, I continued to swim laps.

"I wish the season was almost over," Jennifer said one day, as we sat drip-drying out front of the pool, waiting for Dad.

I was hugging my knees, unconsciously smelling and savoring the chlorine that lingered on my arm. "I'm not minding so much."

My sisters looked at me but I was only halfway paying attention. The chlorine scent had started to grow on me. For some reason it was comforting. I would end up going to sleep with

the smell, tinted with my soap, on me almost every night for the next three years. To this day whenever I walk into a pool I smile.

“What are you doing?” Jennifer asked, a horrified look on her face.

I jerked my head away from my arm. “Nothing.”

The 1992 Summer Olympics started in August. I always enjoyed the track and field action, and diving had been my favorite up until then, but that summer I sat mesmerized during the swimming competitions. These were graceful beings, diving far out and over the water before seemingly floating in, swimming fifty meters of the pool before taking a breath, their bodies elongated, and their movements precise and perfect. It was the push that sent me over.

“I want to be an Olympic swimmer.”

My parents were in the kitchen, making dinner. They looked at me with the same amused yet patient expression as they had when I announced I wanted to be in band.

“Are you serious,” my mom asked, continuing to peel potatoes.

“Yes.” Now I over-think everything. Even with something simple like shopping for a black skirt I will try on ten of them at four different stores before deciding I liked the very first one. But when I was younger I made up my mind without weighing all the various pros and cons and went with it. I wanted to play the flute, so I did. And then, I decided after winning a growing stack of white, red, and blue ribbons, along with spending wide-eyed hours watching TV, that I wanted to swim in the Olympics. And that’s where my thought process ended.

“I thought you didn’t like swimming,” Dad said, only half mockingly.

I shrugged. The imaginary weight of gold medals hung around my neck. I was willing to put up with some teasing if it meant I might actually have a shot at the real thing.

They looked at one another, communicating through their eyes. Something those who have known and loved each other for a very long time can do.

“Okay,” Mom said in almost a sigh. “We’ll sign you up on a swim team first. If you still want to do it in a few years, then we’ll get you a coach.”

By Labor Day I was a YWCA Dolphin.

My father grew up with three brothers. I think the whole notion of females remained a mystery to him even after marrying my mother. It’s ironic then that he would have four daughters and no sons. Yet our gender didn’t keep him from raising us the same way his father raised him—leaving the concerns of schoolwork to my mother and pushing us through sports. It was his way of bonding with us. And the more involved he became, the more quality time we were spending together. Plenty of Saturdays he worked with my sisters and me on field kicks, free throws, and lobs. He was there, watching our games, matches or meets, with an impatient intensity, ready to go over it again during the car ride home. Critique then compliment, that was his way. I suppose it’s how he would’ve talked to sons.

I always loved my dad. Dad who filled coffee mugs full of peanut M&Ms and rented us movies when Mom went out of town; who had wrestling matches with us on the living room floor; who taught us kick ball and how to ride a bike in the backyard; who made our lunches every day of elementary school, and drove us to middle school when we missed the bus. But as I aged, and he went from Daddy to Dad, I realized I didn’t know how to talk to him.

While he was a constant presence in sports, it was Mom who was everywhere else in my life. Mom explained to me about Santa Claus and sex, bought me my first bra and showed me how to shave my legs. Mom worked with me on fractions and on solving fights with my sisters

and girlfriends. Mom listened while I gushed about my crushes, or complained about period cramps. Talking to Mom was natural. With my father, if it wasn't on the topic of sports, I was always searching for something to say. In the silence that stayed between us, I wondered if he too was struggling to connect with me.

When I joined band the distance between us grew. My father's only encounter with a musical instrument was when his younger brother, Jim, took up the trumpet. Jim didn't continue long with his musical career, no doubt inspired by the constant teasing he endured from his brothers. While Mom sat at my concerts, musically oblivious, yet gleaming and video taping the whole thing, Dad seemed like he always just woke up—bleary-eyed and confused, wondering how the hell he got there. By signing up for swimming I added another topic of conversation for us.

Dad didn't know any more about competitive swimming—with heats, starting blocks, sensory pads, relays, and rankings. (And ribbons that outdid any I collected from Southland)—than he did about band. But every day he drove me to and from practice, showing an eagerness to become immersed in the swimming world that he didn't show for the music world. Swimming became an even greater liability in our relationship when the seven-month, six-days-a-week commitment caused me to give up both soccer and basketball.

I checked my gym bag one more time before exiting the locker room at the YWCA. The usuals were there—cap, goggles, towel, comb, and conditioner—along with a soaking wet long-sleeve t-shirt and pair of tights. It was eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning in my second year of swimming. Saturdays were drag days, meaning we wore clothes under and over our bathing suits to give us added weight. It's amazing how much resistance a pair of black Christmas tights

and a UK shirt add. There was no leeway in our timed laps simply because we were carrying extra weight, so we had to kick and pull that much harder. Strength training. On land it would be the equivalent to wearing a backpack while running.

I disliked Saturday morning practices, but not due to the abundance of garments I wore. The head coach was never there on Saturday and Roger, our assistant coach, took over. Looking at it now, I see that my decision on whether or not to continue swimming would have been a lot harder if Roger had never become my head coach the following year. Roger had not retained any of the carefree nature of childhood, if he ever had it. He was serious, not necessarily about swimming, but about life as a whole. This seriousness had seeped into his features, making his face forget how to smile. This seriousness made him demanding, impatient, and stubborn. This seriousness made him an asshole.

“How was practice today,” Dad asked as I slid into the car, hair drip-drying.

“Okay, I guess. Roger was the only one there and as I’m finishing up the breaststroke . . .” I paused, waiting to see if I had to remind Dad of what the moves of the stroke are. He nodded though and I continued, a smile on my face. “So yeah, I finish up and Roger tells me that I didn’t know how to do the kick properly and that I should just stop swimming it. ‘Anytime I have you all swim the breaststroke you just pick another stroke and swim,’ he told me. I mean, I thought coaches were supposed to coach you. Teach you how to do it.”

Dad nodded some more. “Yeah, honey, they are. But those are usually the good ones.”

He reached over and gently squeezed my shoulder, and again I smiled. Now, as an adult I can hug, kiss, and even playfully punch my dad as I did as a child. But in those transition years, when I was uncomfortable in my own body, and my father sensing that gave me space, the

physical contact between us came almost to a stop. I relished the rare moments where he could just be my dad without any awkwardness. “I say, do just what he says. If you think about it, he’s doing you a favor. Whenever everyone else has to do the breaststroke you get to work on your backstroke. Get twice as much practice in.”

My father, as a coach, used the reverse psychology approach, telling his basketball players they weren’t good enough in hopes they’d use that as motivation to prove him wrong. So, I was surprised that when my own coach seemed to be using this approach on me, Dad told me not to fall for it. Not that Roger wanted to make me a star breastroker, but his personality was confrontational—he wanted me to challenge him. And I was just stubborn enough to do so. Usually. But this time I wasn’t going to.

It’s ironic that my father, who knew nothing about the sport at the start off all this, would give me the best coaching advice. By listening to him, and swimming the backstroke each time everyone else swam breast, I would improve my technique and quickness. By the next year each time I swam backstroke in a meet I was taking one to two seconds off my fastest time, an extremely hard feat to accomplish. (Shaving .10 seconds off your fastest time is considered a great swim.)

“Are you going to Olivia’s soccer game with me?” Dad asked, jumping to another subject.

I felt a tug in my chest. I missed soccer. The last game I played was the Kentucky State Championship in which my team won in double overtime 1-0. I had scored the goal. And then I put on a cap and goggles and chose the water instead. It wasn’t that I regretted my decision to swim. I just didn’t think the absence of soccer would be so noticeable, especially to the point

where even watching a game made me want to put on a pair of shin guards and run out onto the field.

“Are you gonna go?” Dad asked again.

“Oh.” I sat up and out of my reverie. “Oh . . . no. I have to practice my flute. There’s a playing test on Monday.”

Although band was optional, it still met every day, with a required practice of twenty minutes a day, five days a week, and concerts three to four times a year; it was not an extracurricular activity. The flute was part of my school work, to be done before and after tennis and swim practice. (Weekly we had to get our playing chart signed by a parent or guardian, proving we fulfilled the required practice time. Mom would look it over. But Dad simply signed it. I could’ve been giving him a document offering to buy his soul for a few hugs and kisses and he wouldn’t have noticed the difference.) So when eighth grade came around, I was confused when everyone began to ask one another, “Are you going to do band in high school?” Band was just like any other class to me. Sure it was way more enjoyable than math or science but a class nonetheless, one that I assumed I would continue in high school, just like math and science. I understood people quitting if they no longer liked playing, but how could band change so dramatically in high school that people were already wondering if they wanted to continue to do it?

Once, during a swim meet in my eighth-grade year, an older teammate of mine who attended Lafayette found out I played the flute.

“Are you going to play in high school?” he asked, his body wet from just hopping out of the pool.

“Yeah,” I replied, forgetting that I was fed up with hearing that question. He was cute, and all I could think about was that he was talking to me.

“That’s great. You’ll be going into a really good marching band. They’ve won the state contest five years in a row.”

His remark had no impact on me. I had no idea what marching band was, or the type of commitment and high caliber of performance needed to get to the state championship, much less to win. Five years in a row. I never even asked myself if that was the reason people might not play in high school. Instead, I faked interest. “Wow.”

Not that there was much time to ponder the future of band when swimming had taken on sudden urgency. Mom and Dad had told me, as I entered my third year with the Dolphins, that if I was still serious about going to the Olympics, they would hire a private coach after the season ended. My dream had yet to diminish. At the end of every practice, when my body was ready to shut down, my limbs heavy and strained, my chest tight from lack of oxygen, I chanted to myself, *gold medal, gold medal, gold medal. This is the race*, I’d say, finding an unknown energy to kick faster.

My talent for swimming had surfaced as well. I even succeeded in earning a red swimming cap—a mark of achievement on our team given if your swimming times came in under preexisting regulated times. I had placed in both freestyle and backstroke. I was miles away from my inexperienced eleven-year-old self at Southland, who was afraid to dive in the water, and who swam in a zig-zag pattern whenever she did the backstroke. Miles closer to my gold medal dream.

My band director, Mrs. Hawkins, made the announcement on a Friday, in mid-October.

“Next week,” she said, quieting us down by tapping her baton against the stand “is eighth grade band night. We will be playing with the Lafayette band at their football game.”

As in response to any sort of announcement made, the band began to twitter in their seats, whispering anxiously to those around them. What was this *band night*?

“We will sit in the stands alongside Lafayette’s band and we will play the pep band music with them,” Mrs. Hawkins continued, still mechanically tapping her baton. “At half time they will perform for us. This experience will let you see what you will be doing next year if you choose to continue to play in high school.”

I should’ve been watching more college football. Maybe then I would’ve gotten the concept of marching band. Maybe then the experience of seeing it in person would’ve been less enchanting, dulled by the weekly Saturday afternoons of watching the Kentucky Wildcats form designs on the field. As it was, I was still obsessing over basketball and didn’t have time to watch their football team lose week after week. So the following Friday, I went in blind. Blind and impressionable.

On a crisp, clear, October night I attended my first Lafayette football game. Like Scrooge being lead by the Ghost of Christmas Future, we eighth graders sat nervously in our seats, taking in through the stadium what our band life could be like in less than a year. We dressed in khakis and maroon Jessie Clark shirts. The high-schoolers wore the traditional Lafayette uniform including pants, jacket, cross belt, citation cord, and a hat with a red plume (which they were allowed to take off once they were all seated).

They had filed silently into the stands. I knew a freshman, Paige, from tennis, and I kept glancing to see if I could find her. When I did, I had to look again. Although she was indeed the

same girl I cracked jokes with from across the net, in that uniform she seemed transformed, mature, and aware, at least in part, that she represented something greater than herself.

“Do they ever smile?” I whispered to Shauna, not sure if we were supposed to be quiet as well. I suddenly felt small, and wondered for the first time at my prospective future in band.

But then the game started, and with the kickoff, the atmosphere changed. Lafayette’s band exploded into ceaseless chatter, with friendly bantering and flirting, acting like the high school kids they were. I found Paige again, her mouth was open in a wide laugh, bits of brown hair coming loose from her pony tail, looking exactly like I last saw her on the tennis court. I too began to loosen up as the eighth graders, following Lafayette’s lead, played “Hang On Sloopy” and “Shout” during time outs and first downs, started dancing to the drum cadence, and chanted Lafayette’s name along with the cheerleaders.

Lafayette High School was known for having a good baseball and softball team, a good girls’ soccer team, a theater program, and band. Football had never been a particular source of achievement there. But on that night, Lafayette was winning. In fact, it would be the only game Lafayette won all season. The victory worked to heighten the crowd’s good-time mood, and I was soaking it in along with the rest of them.

“I guess they can smile!” Shauna shouted to me as we were standing, shaking our bodies to the drum beats.

“Yeah,” I said, smiling myself, “I guess they can.”

As halftime approached though, the band’s mood changed again. With the time clock showing ten minutes left to play, they were called to attention and all went silent. Just as they came into the stands, they filed down: shoulders back and heads up, to go rehearse before they performed. Feeling bold I watched their faces as they walked down the bleacher steps. Their

features were set, their eyes purposeful. I felt a nervous energy, the kind I now got at the pool as I positioned myself on the starting block, awaiting the whistle. But as a spectator to what was about to happen, I wasn't sure why I had that adrenaline then. I saw it as a psychic energy—the kind that would come over me every time we performed should I choose to become a part of this band.

In what appeared an effortless fashion the band performed to the sounds of the Broadway musical *Les Miserables*. One of my favorites. I watched in a flabbergasted silence. And finally, finally I understood. Band in high school was not band in middle school. It was marching band, and marching band was in your face. Visual and musical pictures, formed by discipline and desire, creating moments that became powerful and poignant.

My parents, sitting in near-by stands didn't watch either the game or the halftime show as much as they watched me. They had been talking to veteran band parents around them. These conversations led to the information that Lafayette's band required a time commitment of five to seven days a week, with practice at least two and a half hours after school, football games on Friday nights, and competition on Saturday, with travel sometimes extending into Sunday. A schedule, not exact, but similar to the one I'd have with swimming. When the band hit their final note, I, along with the rest of the crowd, jumped to my feet in a roar. I was oblivious then to the decision I'd have to make. In the midst of my applause I believed that my life could belong underneath those stadium lights, and on top of an Olympic podium. The best of both dreams. My parents looked on, heavy with responsibility. They were going to have to tell me that my dream had to take place in or out of the water. To pick only one. And that the decision would have to be made soon.

I took the news well. I ignored it. I continued practicing hard in both areas telling my peers, yes of course I'm going to play at Lafayette; absolutely I'll still be swimming next year. Mom was constantly finding quiet moments in which to remind me that a decision had to be made. Dad never said a word. Maybe he was afraid that any suggestions on his part would be taken as pressure and I'd become angry. Maybe he just didn't know what to say, soft spoken advice never being his area of expertise. Or maybe he knew that I knew where he stood, and he was hoping in his silence that I would come to stand there as well.

Swimming still wasn't basketball, a sport he would never cease to love and which he spent countless hours practicing with my sister Kimmy. But it wasn't band. What did he know about pitch and intonation? March time and drum majors? (When he heard the phrase "battle of the bands" used by directors to indicate a competition he felt that should mean that all the bands lined up on the field and fought until whoever was the last standing won.) The band world, where judges picked winners based on choreography and color guard routines, was beyond his understanding.

My last swim meet was the state championships in Frankfort, in early March. Going in, I knew it might be the last time I swam. Roger had dulled the sport of swimming for me with practice after practice of sharp statements, obvious favoritism, and macho bullshit. There was rarely a day I didn't leave pissed off. Somewhere in those last couple of months I was no longer chanting *gold medal* at the end of practice, but *I hate him, hate him, hate him!* My reasons for swimming had changed, and I didn't like that.

But while I remained uncertain about my future in the water, I accurately guessed, after warm ups, that the meet was going to be a good one. Almost every pool's water feels different.

I remember finishing warm ups at 6:30 in the morning before a meet and telling my mom the water felt thick and my movements in it sluggish. Sometimes the water was choppy, the constant ripple of waves under my body making it impossible to establish any sort of rhythm; or even airy, where I felt so disconnected from the water I was fighting twice as hard to get anywhere in it. That day in March the water was perfect—calm and silky—my body sleek as I glided in it, each stroke almost effortless.

My first race that day was the 200 yard medley relay, and I was swimming backstroke. The backstroke is the first leg of the race, where the pace is set. Not to add any pressure or anything. But not only was I the first to touch the wall, we ended up winning, and beating our record by 2.5 seconds.

My next event was the 100 yard backstroke. It was the best backstroke race in my career. The problem with backstroke is that except for the people right next to you, you can't see your competitors in the pool. My mind set was that I was always in last, so that I would kick and pull that much harder. I had no idea where I stood as my hand hit the wall. Derrick, my assistant coach, was there to greet me when I climbed out of the pool. He was jumping up and down, his black dread locks bouncing behind him.

I had swum in the last heat of that event and less than a minute later the results from all the heats were tallied. I placed third and shaved three seconds from my fastest time.

"Third place!" Derrick shouted, wrapping his arms around me. "See! Don't you want to keep doing this?"

My mouth hurt from smiling so wide. "Yeah, maybe." It still wasn't a yes, but it was closer.

And maybe if Derrick had been there to greet me after my freestyle swim I could've said yes, could've held onto that enthusiasm and excitement that had been there at the beginning of all this. But Derrick wasn't there. Roger was.

Out of five heats and twelve teams in the 100 yard freestyle, I finished in sixth place, was the top finisher from my team, and shaved .53 seconds from my time. The 100 free was a race I had only started swimming that year, and to have those results after only six months was something I was proud of. Roger met me out of the water when I had yet to know any of this. I was breathing hard, but my body felt light. Swimmers can sense when they've done well.

"So," I asked. "What was my time?"

"1:04.42," Roger said, not taking his eyes off the clipboard in his hands.

I wanted to spin around, maybe do a quick dance, but Roger's demeanor didn't allow for celebrating.

"Not too bad." He gave me a quick pat on the back. "I was hoping you might make it at a minute. We haven't had anyone do that this season. I guess I'll have to hope that Megan can do it for the eleven-and-twelve-year-olds." He walked away, oblivious to the impact his remarks made. Not that I had ever received a true compliment from Roger, but neither had I gotten used to his hard-nosed, clipped attitude. And it was in that moment—when I had just swum my best freestyle race, and needed recognition for it, needed it because I no longer knew if swimming was what I wanted to pursue, and after that day would either continue it indefinitely or walk away for good—that he failed me again.

There were many factors that played a subconscious part in my choosing—losing my first swim coach, developing a learning relationship with Lafayette's band director, beginning to play music as art, even recognizing Lafayette's music. If, in my one marching band experience, I

didn't know *Les Miserables* it would have still remained beautiful, but less personal, less touching. But that day with Roger, hearing his dismissive remarks, finally succeeded in wearing down my enthusiasm for the sport that had once been so easy to love. I took the imaginary gold medals from my neck, and said goodbye to that dream.

After the meet (in which my freestyle relay team finished second) there were still two weeks left of the season. There were no more meets and practice wasn't necessary, yet everyone was going to be there, claiming to get ready for the summer session, but mostly socializing. I promised to be there as well, but I didn't go. Except once.

I went in, collected my ribbons and medals from the last meet, and left. I didn't say goodbye to anyone.

"So, I guess you're going to do band?"

I was sitting on my parents' bed. Mom had called me in their room to talk with her and dad—and she called me with an authority in her voice that meant I was due for a lecture. I came in nervously and positioned myself on the edge of the bed, unsure of what I had done. Then she asked that question. I would rather have gotten the sex talk again than have to tell my dad I wasn't going to swim. Not that he didn't already know.

It was late April at this point. Swimming had long been over and I had shown no interest in beginning any sort of training. I had also gotten the audition music for Lafayette and had been practicing incessantly.

I shrugged.

"It's a yes, or no question, Grace."

"Yeah, I guess so."

“You want to tell us why?” Mom asked. My parents were nothing if not thorough when it came to our lives and our decisions. I know now their persistence was only because they cared so much. At the time the questions simply felt like suffocation.

“I don’t know.” I was having a hard time giving my voice any volume.

“Is it because of Roger?” Dad’s own voice lacked strength. I could tell in his whispers he was trying to hide his disappointment.

I shrugged again, drawing swirling patterns on my parents’ comforter. “Yeah.”

“We’ll get you a private coach, honey. You don’t have to have Roger anymore.”

My lip started to quiver. “I know I just” Whenever I brought home straight As I felt as if I were doing Mom proud. And whenever I accomplished anything in sports—a goal, a basket, a red swimming cap—I was doing Dad proud. Now I felt like I was saying I didn’t want to make him proud anymore.

“Okay,” Mom said cheerfully. “That’s fine. We just wanted to know.” I don’t know if she was acting that way for me or Dad.

Dad sighed, and tried to smile. “I knew it,” he said. “I knew on eighth grade band night that I lost my athlete.” He said it as a joke, but it didn’t come out that way, and I knew he didn’t feel that way.

I gave a forced laugh and slid off the bed. “Well, I’m gonna go.” I left the room, never once having looked squarely at my parents, and went upstairs to cry.

Still I don’t know if Dad was right—if I made my decision to continue band over swimming on that October night, dancing to drum beats and witnessing marching band in a silent awe. It’s possible I did commit a part of myself to Lafayette then. I wanted to belong to that

applause, and I could've bottled those cheers up, and carried them around inside me before I chose. I do know that thirteen years later I've never wished I picked swimming instead. I made the right decision. For me. Pleasing my parents was something I continued to do—bringing home good grades and doing chores with minimal complaint, and always leaving them with a place and a number where I'd be when I went out. But when I picked band I also learned to please myself. The decision came with a mix of guilt and independence. It also caused a sense of panic: what about Dad?

After my last band competition, four years later, my father would be the one I embraced. As I sobbed in his arms he carried me away from the field. I could hug him again, and he could understand the importance of my tears: An achievement that I truly believe never would've happened had I remained in the water.

For the Music

The Lafayette band formed fifty-six years before I wore the uniform. Its beginnings came with the opening of Lafayette High School in 1939, on the south-western side of Lexington, Kentucky, surrounded by miles of farm land. There were no fancy flags, or flashy uniforms at the time; no nationally known contests with bright lights and crowds of over 20,000; no marching contests at all. The band didn't even have a motto – a unique trademark that wouldn't come around for another twenty years. No, at the start of it all, there were only the forty members and the music. But the 1939 band played for the same reason all the bands that came to follow played—initially and ultimately for the music.

As the city of Lexington expanded, Lafayette High School's enrollment increased, and its marching band quietly developed. In 1943 Lafayette purchased uniforms, the same uniforms still worn today. In 1973 the band added a flag corps, and a year later, a rifle corps. The band's numbers continued to grow with these additions. When ninth grade shifted from middle school to high school in the 1980s, more than two hundred students took part in band.

In 1960 Kentucky joined Ohio and Indiana and began hosting marching band competitions. Soon after, Lafayette competed both in and out of state. Internationally recognized contests such as the Bands of America (BOA) and the Contest of Champions in Murfreesboro, Tennessee took off in the early seventies, followed closely by the Kentucky Music Educators Association (KMEA) State Marching Band Championship in the eighties.

Lafayette placed highly in these contests, even winning often enough to make the band community take notice. By the time I picked up my flute in 1991, Lafayette was on its way to winning a second consecutive Contest of Champions and State Championship.

With the aid of a computer program—co-designed by Lafayette’s own band director Steve Moore in 1990—drill designs could be set faster, with more intricacy, more elaboration. A routine that once took eighty hours to coordinate by hand could now be completed in under forty. Visually the color guard was breaking out as well, adding, along with their array of flags, props such as giant yellow balls and step ladders that they danced on and around.

Marching band had become glitzy, even glamorous. And with the colorful plaques and decorative trophies lining Lafayette’s walls and cluttering its storage closet, the band was every bit as well known and competitive as the school’s sports teams.

But at the heart of it all there was still the music, and the musicians who played it. The common love that united them, committed them to work with and because of one another, fitted them in the same uniform; made them not individuals marching towards separate successes, but one band with the same desire. A community. A family.

A heat wave hit Lexington in the summer of 1995. My first summer of band camp. It was eight o’clock on a Tuesday morning in late July when I stood on the blacktop behind Lafayette, surrounded by forty-five other freshmen. They, no doubt like me, were feeling the beginnings of sweat collect on their foreheads, behind their knees, on their backs, and every other part of their body already suffering in the sun’s early morning rays. We were in block formation, standing at parade rest—legs apart, heads down and hands clasped loosely in front of us—waiting to be called to attention.

“Now,” Mr. Moore said, his voice both gentle and deep, his stride relaxed but purposeful as he moved between us. “When I call you to attention bring your feet together, shoulders back, head up, hands at your side. And you yell *Pride!*”

He had gone over all of this the day before. But with twelve hours a day given to band camp, there were many things we had learned on that first day, and he knew, just as I was experiencing, that our minds were more than a little overwhelmed with information. “All right. Let’s try it. Band ten-hut!”

My legs came together, my head snapped up. “Pride.” I spoke the word, as if greeting a stranger on a street—casual, conservative. Nowhere near the definition of a yell.

The other freshmen fared no better. “When I call you to attention,” Mr. Moore responded, his voice taking on the hushed, strained tone of someone trying to control his anger, “you yell *Pride*. You cannot be hesitant or unsure about this! I gave you that break yesterday. If you can’t even say the word with some meaning behind it, then you’re never going to be able to embody it out on the field!”

A hard working, no-nonsense, there’s-a-time-and-place-for-laughter-and-the band-field-isn’t-it, kind of man, I still thought Mr. Moore was being a little uptight on what word we said and at what volume we said it. As long as we all came together at the same time what did it matter if we shouted *pride*, or whispered *pickles*, or sang *pennies*? There was nothing random about the word choice though. Lafayette band was steeped in tradition, and the embodiment of *Pride* was perhaps one of the most important ones.

In 1960 the Lafayette band was competing at the Lion’s Club International Convention in Chicago. This was the first time the band was going out of state and the director, Mr. Hall, wanted a catch phrase. After a couple of weeks of deliberation the band came up with the name

Pride of the Bluegrass. Soon after, added to the upper right arm of the uniform, was a patch with the logo. But it wasn't enough that the band called themselves the Pride of the Bluegrass without representing that notion. It became an attitude. In the late sixties the call to attention changed from *yes sir* to *Pride*. And soon following, the motto turned into the call to dismiss: After any performance, whether it was on the track around our own football field, in the parking lot of the Georgia Dome after placing fourth in a BOA competition, or under the lights at the University of Kentucky's Commonwealth Stadium after winning the state championship, the band, gathered close together, would be asked by the director: "Who are you?" And we would respond in a confident, unanimous shout, "Lafayette Band, Pride of the Bluegrass, sir!" A reminder not just to us, but to all present, that we were aware of who we were, and what we stood for, at all times, no matter the results.

So when we said the word *Pride*, on that humidity-soaked summer day in 1995, in the same nonchalant manner in which we might yawn, Mr. Moore was not pleased.

"Let's do it again . . . To the ready."

I closed my eyes as my head fell forward, hoping to somehow go unnoticed among my peers. I knew I wasn't going to be able to yell *pride*. The same shyness that had prevented me from being able to order my own food at McDonald's at the age of eleven had stayed with me at fourteen. My first thought when being told I had to shout out something was *What if somebody hears me?* It didn't matter that everybody else would be saying it as well. I had missed the point completely.

"Band, ten-hut!"

About half the freshmen responded with force in their voices.

“Better,” Mr. Moore said, now standing in front of us. “But it isn’t enough for some of you to do it. For this thing to work, it requires everyone’s participation. You are all part of the same organization.”

I didn’t feel part of anything.

Aside from working on marching fundamentals separately from the upperclassmen, pinned on my head, as it was on every other freshmen’s, was a red and white striped beanie. Another of Lafayette’s traditions. For the full extent of band camp each freshman had to wear one, and if s/he forgot it at home, that freshman was forced to put on either a large sign saying “I forgot my beanie” or a dunce cap.

“Is it absolutely necessary that it be pointed out to us that we’re freshmen?” I asked my friend Shauna the first day we received the beanies. I glanced at the bobby pins in my hand and stuck another in my hair to keep the beanie from flying off. “I mean, I think we know.” My voice, as it often does when I’m highly agitated, was louder than I thought.

Crystal, a junior I played soccer with a few years before, came up to me. “Don’t worry about it, Grace,” she said, giving my arm a light squeeze. “We all had to do it.”

But I didn’t care that the 180 upperclassman around me who didn’t have to spend the next three weeks with a felt beanie, (propeller and all), on top of their heads, once had to. Or that one, two, or three years previous, these same people were the last to line up for lunch, or for bus sign ups; or that they had three different classes all telling them to get their heels higher during mark time (marching in place), or to hold their instrument more level, or to keep their shoulders back. All of that was happening to me as band camp unfolded and it caused me to feel alienated, which made my stubborn streak come out.

I couldn't make myself shout the word *Pride*. I was too shy and too ignorant to see the importance of it, but thought I should be given the same privileges as those who could. I was more than happy to join a band with a rich tradition of winning, but I didn't want to participate in the other traditions it upheld, which included listening to section leaders.

The position of a section leader was given to the best player of each instrument—sometimes it was a junior, but almost always—a senior. The section leader, simply put, placed right underneath the director and had the power to tell people what to do. My own section leader was Heather Erbe, an extremely short, pig-nosed girl who was an amazing flute player but lacked the kindness and patience to be a good section leader. While the proper way to help someone improve was compliment, critique, compliment, Heather skipped out on the compliment part. She came across as bossy and bitchy. “You march like a duck!” she told me during fundamentals, the pitch of her voice strained with aggravation. “Quit sticking your butt out.” There were other upperclassmen, who like Heather, seemed lost on a power trip, embarrassing and barking at freshmen to try to get them to improve. Years later, finding myself in the section leader position, I would struggle with my own irritations with freshmen and have to remind myself continuously to soften my tone, to help through suggestions and not commands.

One day, before practice began, while standing in block formation, I placed my right hand over my heart and held up my left hand. “I vow, in spirit, never to become an upperclassmen,” I said, waiting until Heather walked by me to do so. I knew she heard me and although I shook when I said it, I wanted her to. Mr. Moore had said we were all part of one unit, but I wanted nothing to do with Heather Erbe, even if she and I did wear the same uniform.

I told this to my mom near the end of the three-week camp. It was a typical summer night at 9:30 after band. I was sitting on the couch, dehydrated, sun-burned, and exhausted, peeling off my socks and trying not to notice the faint but lingering scent of sweat rising from my feet.

“If you hate it so much, Grace, then why do you do it?” My mom was tolerant of my bitching up to a point. But when I expelled the same complaints each time I came home I about exhausted her motherly sympathy.

I paused, the sock still covering my toes. “I don’t know.”

“You have no idea why you get up and do this every day?” She asked, standing a few feet from me with her arms folded. Her question wasn’t sarcastic, but I knew she didn’t believe my answer.

I leaned back on the couch. My lower back throbbed, and my calves ached; my whole body seemed to pulsate with pain. I wanted to burn the beanie still on my head, and I wanted to sucker punch Heather for her snide remarks. I kept tripping when I tried to march backwards, and I was jittery whenever Mr. Moore strode near me, fearful that he’d see me make a mistake and my name would ring in that microphone always pinned to his shirt collar for all of Lexington to hear. But that didn’t make up my whole band experience, not the reasons I still woke up each morning feeling expectant.

“The music,” I told Mom behind closed eye lids.

“What about it?” she asked.

Our show was titled *Treasures of the Czars*, with works by Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich, outlining the rise and fall of the Czar dynasty, specifically that of the last Czar, Nicholas the Second. Royalty music. It was intense, dramatic, passionate, and climactic.

Different from the blusey-swing tunes, or light, catchy show tunes of some of our competitors. The music was enveloped, as Lafayette was, in a deep history. And like Lafayette's history, I didn't necessarily understand it, but I was beginning to. Only the day before that, the band had run through almost the whole opener. In the performance there were only the notes—to release, to express, to take over you. When I played, everything else faded out of me. I forgot about my dislike for Heather, the cramping in my arms, the heat radiating off the blacktop, the noise from the football team nearby. The music told a story, and the story was prominent and powerful. I melted into it—as if I were one of Nicholas' own daughters, a Czar princess needing to make my narrative known, to share the sorrows of my brother's death, the fear of my father's abdication—these long ago lives rising again through the notes. Running through only that one part of the show gave me a glimpse of what it all could be—something that mattered more than the everyday trivialities.

“When I'm out there playing, when I can see the show coming together, set by set, note by note . . . it's like making magic. We get done and my heart is tingling.” I sat up and opened my eyes, giving my mom a lopsided smile. “Okay, that sounds stupid, but whatever. It would make sense if you were playing.”

“It makes sense now,” Mom said. “So quit being a baby and forget that other stuff. Play to play. Don't play for *Heather*!” She said “Heather” in a Valley-Girl tone and I laughed at it, instantly lightened.

Two days later we performed the whole opener for parents' night. When Heather told me beforehand that I needed to make sure not to drop my right shoulder I closed my eyes briefly to stop myself from rolling them, but then nodded sincerely and told her I'd watch it.

She looked surprised at my compliancy. “Okay. Good,” she said, and there was almost a smile on her face, and I almost wanted to give her one back.

That night after we performed, the beanies came off.

“You gonna keep it?” Crystal asked me, watching as I rubbed my fingers over the felt.

“I don’t know. At first, I didn’t think so. But now . . .” I looked up and shrugged. “It’s kinda like a reminder.”

“Yup. Shows that you’re halfway to becoming a full member of this band.”

“What do you mean halfway?” I asked.

She smiled knowingly. “You survived band camp. Now you gotta perform in a contest.”

I began to have that isolated feeling again, as if a fog surrounded me, and while I could clearly see out of it and into the other members of the band, they could not yet see me. But there wasn’t much time for that to take me over. A few days later, school started. And while the majority of the student body entered through the front doors, I walked around back with the other band members to put up our instruments in the band room located behind the gym. Their familiar faces calmed the rising panic I had of entering a new school. Before I even stepped in the classroom I had already become part of something. Crystal, I’d learn, wasn’t wrong in telling me my initiation into the band wasn’t completed. But it had begun. Picking up my stride to get next to some cute junior tenor sax players, I felt excited about the approaching marching season. Proud even. Almost to where I could shout it.

There’s a geek status that goes along with playing a musical instrument. Instead of choosing the more prestigious path of cheerleader-football-basketball-player recognition, we decide we want to sit in chairs and pluck, bang, and blow out notes from long dead or foreign

guys. With marching band we do the same thing sans chairs, making formations and wearing goofy hats. Not exactly the road to popularity. But Lafayette's band was different. Lafayette's band included more than 250 members (that number only slightly less than a graduating class), and more than that, it was what the school was known for. There was, of course, in the school, the popular clique made up of jocks and cheerleaders, as well as anyone they choose to date (which was usually one another), but that crowd was small, and I rarely noticed. Band members were on the student council, in the school plays, and even jocks themselves. We had our own letter jackets, a deep blue compared to the red given to athletes. When our drum major won homecoming queen I knew this band wasn't like others. And I could feel myself being folded into the people the same way I was with the music.

The night before my first competition, I lay awake in bed, visualizing the show, each moment of crescendo, each trill and run—all perfect. Moving fluidly, confidently, each picture locking into place—the space between people even and precise. Mom had told me to play for the music, because of my own love for it. But this band went beyond personal interest. We all loved music. I had to want to play because of everyone's passion. Even Heather's. I could never see myself liking her—and in truth I never would—but she wanted the same thing for the band that I did. Wanted it more, probably, as her investment in it was greater. Lying with my hands behind my head, less than twelve hours before I was to perform, I *did* want to play for Heather. And when that thought didn't surprise me, I knew that I was finally ready to call this band my family.

We got off the bus at Male High School in Louisville for the Louisville Classic Band Contest on a cloudy, cool Saturday. There was silence among the band as we unloaded our instruments and headed to warm-ups. I traced the patch on the right shoulder of the jacket:

“Lafayette Band, Pride of the Bluegrass.” That’s me, I thought. I’m part of the Pride of the Bluegrass. I thought of the expectations that came with that and suddenly wanted to vomit.

“Nervous?” one of the older flute players asked me as we lined up to march to the field.

“Something like that.” In truth, I felt as if I were headed toward my death. The intensity in the air was so heavy it pressed against my shoulders and I was fighting to keep my legs from shaking.

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “Well, don’t worry, it’s natural. Remember, we’ll all be out there with you.”

My breathing still sounded shallow in my helmet but her words had slowed down the frantic pace of my heart. Out there with me. It would be a couple of more years before the movie *White Squall* came out, coining the phrase *Where we go one, we go all*, but that was what I understood at that moment. Nerves would continue to overtake me before every contest in all the four years I played. But always there was the calming notion that I was not alone. Whatever I was feeling, I did so with many others. And whatever the performance, it was shared. We would jump into one another’s arms, ecstatic after a powerful show, or fall into those same arms, crying during those times when the band didn’t click, and the results were disappointing. Having others to experience those times with made the great moments that much richer and the hard ones easier to bear.

When the band reached the end zone I looked up quickly at the stands. There appeared to be no empty seat, and I caught sight of numerous red, white, and blue flags—Lafayette’s colors—fluttering about. I was searching for my parents when Mr. Moore had us assume the parade rest position and my head fell forward, everything disappearing except the ground at my feet. Immediately I started hissing. Hissing before a performance was yet another Lafayette

tradition. It had begun sometime in the early seventies—too far back for any of the present members to know its origins. But like every other tradition, it was followed faithfully, the bands of the past remaining alive through the standards they set and we upheld. Maybe hissing was done to help us focus and relax—the steady stream of air we each produced allowing us to concentrate on the moment. If anything it certainly reminded us to breathe.

“Band, ten-hut!” Mr. Moore’s voice, crisp and precise, called us to attention.

“Pride!” I expelled the word from my chest. You couldn’t distinguish my voice from the hundreds of others, but it no longer mattered to me if you could. I shouted it to be heard, recognized, remembered. I was a long way from the scared girl at band camp. I wore the uniform now.

The drums began their rhythmic beat and we marched out on the field, the show now underway. I would perform over forty times while in high school. Many of those performances brought the audience directly to its feet, unanimous in its applause, and some were so amazing, band members cried after it was over, moved beyond words in expressing how it affected them. My first performance was not yet in that league of emotions—the show still too new for it to be completely natural—but it remained a great one. Our show’s opener, the first of Shostakovich’s pieces, was “Folk Dances,” a heavily percussive and brass-based piece. Its quick tempo and booming notes evoked the beginnings of the Czar empire: power and riches and a dynasty that seemed everlasting. The band came to the first big hit of the song, making a crown on the field—the music swelled, our heads snapped up, our horns pointed high to the judges’ box, the color guard revealed colorful oblong shaped props—jewels for the crown. The crowd roared and there was a clicking that occurred between the band members—an energy that moved in waves between us as we went from song to song, slowing it down for “Romance from the Gadfly

Suite,” and then speeding it back up, almost frantically in “Finale to the Fifth Symphony,” the color guard bending backwards over stools, kicking their legs in the air, the band forming sharp diagonals, and triangles. Finally we moved to the closer, “Fire of Eternal Glory,” the band in a block, stretching from twenty-five yard line to twenty-five yard line, marching slowly to the front of the field, the notes low and big; the color guard in the back, with yellow and blue flags lifted on ten foot poles, arching the flags high in the air and then brushing them across the ground. The intensity building. Then the last note, booming, held longer and longer, the Czar empire crumbling, Nicholas and the Romanov family executed, and then the color guard dropped the flags, each one stopping a foot on the fallen poles, and the band, as taught, snapped our horns down. There was such a rush in me that I didn’t think I had the discipline to get off the field before jumping up and down.

Lafayette was named the Grand Champion of the contest, as well as winning awards for Best Music, Visual, Color Guard, Drum Major, and Percussion. The trophies were great, as was winning. There would always be a breathless thrill whenever I heard Lafayette’s name announced over the loudspeaker as the winner. But it was the moment inside the performance, when I could feel myself expanding, intertwining with those around me and creating a story with the notes for all present to hear that would always mean the most. And on that rapidly darkening day in Louisville, that experience of performing now belonged to me.

I chatted incessantly with my friends as we walked back to the bus—

the surge of energy from competing yet to leave me—when I was interrupted.

“You played well today, Grace.”

I looked around. Heather was walking beside me. “Thanks.” I answered her sincerely, but I didn’t know how to follow it.

“You’ve improved a lot since band camp. Especially on your toe lift.”

“Thanks.” Then, and now, I always believed my toe lift was high right from the start. And if I improved on it, it was not from Heather’s helping me. Still her words were a compliment. And I appreciated her effort, though I was speechless to give it back.

She smiled at my awkwardness. “Yeah, well, good job again.” She quickened her pace and after only a pause, I picked up where I left off in my conversation.

Getting on the bus Crystal stopped me as well. “Congratulations, kid. You did it. You’re now a full blown member of the Lafayette Marching Band. How do you feel?”

“Proud,” I told her, laughing.

“Well good. Then you understand.”

And I did. As I sat leaning against the window of the bus, I didn’t know that Lexington’s tobacco farmers in 1943 helped pay for the uniform I wrinkled with my bad posture. Didn’t know that the pants that were a little too short, and the brass plate centered on my jacket and that constantly needed shining had been worn for fifty years, by bands that had marched on the streets of New York in Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, won the elite Contests of Champions in Murfreesboro, Tennessee four times in the late seventies and five consecutive years starting in 1990, played in multiple states under lights and inside domes to crowds bigger than those at high school state football championship competitions. But I did know that there were experiences pressed and sealed inside the material. Now I was a part of that.

[section break]

For Christmas that year, I told my parents I wanted a letter jacket; not the red one the athletes wore, although I had lettered in tennis as an eighth grader. But the blue one, the one worn by those who marched and performed music.

Mr. Moore

“Have you ever been inspired?”

My dad asked me that question when I came home for Christmas after my first semester in college. I don't clearly remember the conversation that brought about the question. I only remember that I didn't hesitate in responding. The answer was yes. And the source was Steve Moore, my high school band director.

Luck, coincidence, or maybe even fate led Mr. Moore to Lafayette. His own father, Larry Moore, was the head band director at Lafayette in the early seventies. His mother, Carolyn, choreographed the band's color guard (flags). Until they were old enough to wear the uniform themselves, Mr. Moore and his sister spent their summers behind Lafayette High School, watching band camp. Mr. Moore went on to study music at South Carolina and then returned to Kentucky for his masters. In 1986, at the age of twenty-five, he was on his way to Illinois for his doctorate when opportunity presented itself and once again there was an opening at Lafayette. After Larry Moore left, Lafayette had had three different band directors in six years. Putting doctorate plans aside, Mr. Moore interviewed and was chosen for the job. He wouldn't earn his Doctorate of Musical Arts for another sixteen years.

I joined Lafayette band in 1995. Although I didn't know it then, I would be Mr. Moore's last incoming class. I knew only that I abandoned my dreams of being an Olympic swimmer to be in band. And part of my reason was Mr. Moore.

“Grace, are you hot?” Mr. Moore asked with mock concern. The question, spoken into the microphone always clipped on the collar of his shirt, spread out and over the air, echoing off

the brick walls of Lafayette High and into my ears. My face, pink with heat, must have darkened to the deep red of embarrassment.

We had just finished running through all four pieces of our marching band show, music from composer Dmitri Shostakovich, titled *Treasures of the Czars* and had come to attention—meaning we did not move. But, being late afternoon in September, in Kentucky, the humidity was present and powerful, and I wiped sweat from my eyes. Mr. Moore, standing thirty feet above us on the band tower noticed my movement—quick though I had been—and called me out.

I didn't mean to do that! I wanted to shout. *Accident, reflex—you know!* But we didn't talk at attention either, and I was able to control myself enough not to break *that* rule. Unsure what to do I gave him a smile too pathetic to be an apology, not that an apology would've done any good. There was no reason good enough to move once at attention. Period. That's how Lafayette band worked under Steve Moore.

He came by this sort of attitude—the cutting through the bullshit and getting down to the importance of things—naturally. Mr. Moore's father, Larry, (or who the later Lafayette members affectionately referred to as Mr. Mr. Moore,) came in as Lafayette's head director at a time when Lafayette's band program had started to decline from the marching monster it had been in the early and mid-sixties. The intensity level had dropped. The bullshit was back.

Once, during Larry's first year as director the band members all sat down, refusing to practice any longer.

"You're workin' us like dogs," one of them yelled. "We ain't used to doin' this much!"

"You ain't used to winnin' much either!" Larry snapped back.

Not all the members of the 1973 band made it through to the end. But those who did (who choose that day to stand up and shut up) helped to turn that band around. By 1975 Larry Moore's Lafayette band was not only invited to the elite Contest of Champions in Tennessee, but ended up winning it—for the next four years in a row.

If there were other ways to direct a band Steve Moore either didn't know them or didn't care. Two weeks before I saw a bee land on a girl's flute while she was at attention. Mr. Moore, standing near the area walked over and said calmly but with undeniable force, "Don't move your flute, you're at attention. The bee will go away, keep still!" Find your discipline, find your focus. He reminded us of this constantly.

His question to me used a rarer, lighthearted approach. The 3 x 4 sign that hung on the band tower embodied the standard, fierce-hearted approach: *To be on time is to be late. To be early is to be on time.* After school practice began at 3:10, which meant we were lined up on the field ready to go at 3:05. I can't remember my habits before high school band, but I certainly adopted this attitude during it. I never missed curfew, or a flight. I was never late for a test or a meeting. I started being called dependable and reliable.

On that particular day though, I wasn't being either. It would be easy to dismiss what I did, claiming that in the grand scheme of things wiping sweat is not a reason to revoke reliability, and I certainly shouldn't have been called out on it. But marching band works as one unit, (think synchronized swimming on land, and on a larger scale). When we play we do so together, our instruments the same pitch, our notes the same length. When move we do so together, our instruments at the same level, our toe lift at the same height. And when we stop we do so together. One person moving destroys the whole scene, like breaking character on stage, or a smudge on the corner of a painting. A part of what has been created is destroyed.

Once, before a competition, Mr. Moore showed us a picture of the 1992 band marching out onto the field. Their rows were straight, the spacing between them even, the step they each took no longer or shorter than anyone else's. The moment was perfect. Each time he said someone's name in the microphone, each time he told us to run a sequence again, each time he called for an earlier, a later or a longer practice, he was drawing lines and challenging us to go a little further, to make our own perfection.

"I know it's hot today," Mr. Moore said, climbing down from the thirty-foot band tower. "Let me tell you something though; you cannot let weather be a factor in what you do. I've gone to State where the weather has been ninety degrees, and if you think you're sweating now, wait until you put on that wool jacket." His shoe touched the last rung and then he was on the ground. Shifting my eyes left I could see him briefly before he began walking through the rows and was lost to me.

"And other years it's snowing," he continued. His hands were probably clasped loosely behind his back as they often were when he walked, his head turning slowly from side to side as he passed students, making sure his words were directed to everyone. "Your lips are chapped, and your hands are frozen from the cold, and to top it off, the field is muddy and your feet sink with each step you take."

I closed my eyes briefly and tried to picture hard winds and freezing rain, the cold numbing my fingers. The idea seemed impossible while standing at attention, perspiring. The day was so still, the air was so heavy, winter weather actually sounded welcoming.

"But you gotta get in your head, Lafayette," he went on, his voice causing my mental image to fade, "that whatever the conditions, you have a show to perform. And you still have to perform it to your highest standards."

He paused, and I could hear his footsteps on the blacktop, slow but continuing down the rows. Although Mr. Moore's speeches were often long, he never rambled, always knowing the amount of time needed for the words to make an impression.

"You must, *must* learn to be in the here and now." Here I could picture him making a fist with his left hand and lightly pounding it in his right hand; not out of anger, but for emphasis. "The present is all that matters. Give each situation its proper place. And right now your place is on this band field, so be in that moment."

I saw movement from the corner of my left eye and knew he was in front of the band tower. He stood there for a second before starting to make his way back up, not speaking again until he was at the top. He lifted his left arm, looking at his watch. I could tell by the sun's position, and the dull throbbing in my back that practice was basically over. But Mr. Moore didn't just glance at his watch, he stared at it for a moment, a move that told me he was deciding something, and I already knew what.

"It's 5:26, Lafayette," he said. "You still have four minutes of practice. Give it to me, and give it to yourselves. Let's run the show again, what do you say?"

The show, from start to finish, was fifteen minutes long. Mr. Moore knew that, and so did every one of us. And yet, without hesitating, we unanimously shouted, "Yeah!" More than that, we ran (emphasis on *ran*) back to our opening spots.

For the rest of my time at Lafayette, I was never called out again.

I never had a crush on Mr. Moore; as a fourteen-year-old, I viewed anyone over twenty as father-like, but I still noticed his attractiveness. He was thirty-four with dark brown hair only beginning to show gray around the temples. He didn't smile often, but when he did tiny, yet

visible, crows' feet appeared above his tanned cheeks. Neither unfriendly, nor unhappy, Mr. Moore believed in the worth of the smile—didn't just give it away as some strangers do when making eye contact on the street. When he smiled there was meaning behind it, and it was the one boyish feature on his otherwise hard, handsome face.

His manner projected confidence and ease—making his 5'10'', medium built frame commanding. I always picture him wearing black, a color he wore often. The moment the weather turned, his long black coat came out, leather, buttons all the way up. Although black often is a signature affectation of many various kinds of phonies, the color is also mature—serious and sophisticated. That's the attitude Mr. Moore had when wearing it; the same attitude he had about music. Not that he didn't have a lighter side—he came into class and started playing show tunes on the piano the day he proposed to his girlfriend—but Mr. Moore gave us more than humor. He dressed the part of the success he tried to pass on to us.

And he did pass success on; for the school, that meant trophies. In his previous nine years Mr. Moore led the band to five consecutive Kentucky State Marching Band Championships, and Contest of Champions (in Tennessee) victories. He never lost a marching band contest in the state of Kentucky and the band received the Sudler Shield— an international award for excellence in marching band. He surpassed even his father's achievements. But Mr. Moore wasn't interested in the trophies cluttering the band room. He wasn't concerned with the victories the judges gave us, but with the personal ones. With bettering our performance each time we stepped out on the field, competing to our own highest standards. During competitions he rarely told us where we placed in prelims. Most of the time we didn't care. Probably because we had a confidence that bordered on cockiness we assumed we were always near the top, if not

actually first. But at our last show—and maybe because it was the last and the biggest we gave it more significance— prelims became important.

The last competition of the 1995 season was the Bands of America Grand Nationals at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis. BOA is a national competition and that year seventy-five bands from nineteen states competed, with only fourteen of those bands going to the finals.

Lafayette rested in a nearby high school's cafeteria after prelims, waiting to see if we were going home or staying. When Mr. Moore came in the door, snowflakes on his black coat, the band erupted in applause. Maybe, like me, the band was anxious, and seeing him again we couldn't contain that energy anymore and directed it to the man who got us there.

He smiled and in a calm voice, as if announcing dinner specials, congratulated us on making finals.

Again the cafeteria exploded in applause and cheering. Quickly though, that died away and multiple people began asking where we placed in prelims. We had competed in finals where there were ten bands, but now there were fourteen. These extra four, (along with it being the last competition) somehow added pressure to the situation. It seemed important, vital really, that we place in the top five in prelims. Two, three, maybe even four bands we could beat out if we performed well in the evening, but eight, or ten, or even thirteen other bands seemed impossible. And what if we had placed last among the qualifying bands? We needed to know that going into the finals, that way our hopes wouldn't be too high to actually win this thing, be named National Champion. The band members expressed these concerns among ourselves as the noise and anxiety grew.

Mr. Moore listened to us for about half a minute, probably hoping we'd stop to listen to ourselves and realize how childish and insecure we sounded. Finally he put up his hand.

“Enough.” He didn’t say it loud. He didn’t need to. “If at this point you still think score is the important thing, you’ve missed the whole point of this band and should take off the uniform now.” He crossed his arms and looked around the room, his jaw set.

Some coaches or directors would have started cussing. I’ve had coaches who think four-letter words and increased volume is the way to get through to people. It never worked on me. If Mr. Moore ever shouted I cannot remember when. Instead he talked firmly, and realistically, but not degradingly. Building us as people was his system, not tearing us down. He took a deep breath as if collecting himself and then asked us to close our eyes. “Think back on your performance earlier today . . . Are you seeing what I saw . . . ? Feeling what I felt?”

I always preferred marching outside rather than in domes. There was something about being under the stars, the crisp air hitting your cheeks, filling your lungs, the notes going up, up, up, as if to the heavens themselves, that made my whole body tingle, like lit sparklers were inside me. Outside the elements were raw, the perfect setting to tell a story in notes. Inside domes, the atmosphere was so controlled, too contained. But on that day, our performance seemed to break loose from the confinements, the notes pushing against the inside of the dome, swelling and ringing. I shivered, thinking about it.

“I gotta tell you, that was a fine performance!” Mr. Moore said. “You gotta take that experience and put it into tonight. Raise it up a level. You’ve played once in the dome today. You know how it feels and how it sounds. And you know that you can put on a great show.”

I thought about our last song, “Fires of Eternal Glory.” We started off facing the backfield, away from most of the audience. We marched slowly, creating swirling shapes, the notes drawn out, a sort of pleading. Then, our movements a little faster, we did an about-face, the fifty color guard each revealing two deep red flags, sweeping them in high arcs on either side of

them, the band with our feet shoulder-width apart, keeping us steady as we pour out notes of longing and passion. That moment always caused the audience to clap.

“Now,” Mr. Moore went on, his volume just low enough so I found myself leaning forward, and I imagine most of the band did the same, “you need to be picturing a better show.”

Before the band performed that evening Mr. Moore had us gather around him. We were the last band to go on so the rehearsal area was quiet. I remember thinking it was if we were the only band that existed, that the crowd that filled the Dome was out there only for us, which is how Mr. Moore wanted us to think. He asked us to channel our energies into only the show, to give ourselves fifteen minutes to perform the show of our lives. Give ourselves. He never said do this for me or even for our parents or loved ones, despite the sweet selflessness of the action. He knew, as I would only come to know, that that show, that everything we did, had to be because we wanted it for ourselves.

And in my seven years of marching band, that was the best show I ever played. It brought both audience and band members to tears. I was sure that we placed first. Everyone was. We hugged and congratulated one another. We marched back on that field emotionally exhausted, having given all of ourselves to that performance, but also eager, waiting to hear that the judges too had recognized all we had left out there.

Lafayette placed thirteenth. In prelims I believe we placed eleventh. Now I understand why he didn't tell us. Because eleventh was not something Lafayette was used to, maybe we would've felt defeated and not even attempted to put ourselves out there, seeing as we were already practically last. Even if we were in the top five in prelims, knowing we were near

winning we might have also not given the performance all of our emotion and effort, thinking we only needed to try a little harder to win. Not knowing took out the other bands, the judges and their scoring system. Not knowing let it be only about the music and the marching and the feelings we put into both—the original reasons.

Mr. Moore wasn't going to let us sulk though. He did what he always did, at the end of every practice, every Friday-night football game, and every competition.

He had us gather around him, close, closer, until our shoulders touched the person next to us. We shut our eyes and bowed our heads, forgetting the hunger pains or the crowds, the excitement over a victory or the disappointment over a loss.

He'd call us to attention and our heads would go up and our shoulders back, standing firm, standing tall, standing, despite any of the events that transpired during the day. He'd ask us then, the words sharp and clear, "Who are you?"

And we'd answer together, echoing his strength, "Lafayette Band, Pride of the Bluegrass."

The thirteenth-place finish ceased to matter then (as scores and place always did) when I stood with over 250 other people and proclaimed to the sky, to the audience, and mostly to myself, that I was a Lafayette Band Member. I was representing myself, and an organization greater than myself; I was standing proud and I believed in what I was doing. I had an understanding of who I was, a partial understanding, to be sure—does anyone ever know herself completely—but it was an understanding that at fourteen I was grateful to have.

Mr. Moore never passed up an opportunity in which he could remind us, or rather, let us remind ourselves, of our identity—not even when he decided to leave.

[section break]

The announcement came on a Monday in March: Mr. Moore wanted us all to meet after school. Marching band was over for the year and there were no major concert band performances coming up, so the request was odd.

Immediately the rumors started flying that he was leaving.

“This happens every year,” a sophomore color guard told me in geometry class. “People start freaking out and then we go to the meeting, and it’s always something like ‘We’ve upped the prices on our cheese and sausage collection, so be sure to make your Aunt Sue aware when you’re selling to her.’ Mr. Moore’s not going anywhere.”

She hadn’t convinced me. Walking to the band room after sixth hour I found myself taking deep breaths, trying to relax.

I took a seat off to the right of the podium and instantly I knew that everyone around me was uneasy too. No one was saying much, just exchanging hushed, urgent tones, wondering if this time the rumor would be true.

Mr. Moore was standing in the frame of his office doorway, talking to the assistant director and the school’s principal. After a few minutes he turned away and walked up to the podium; as usual, he was in black. There was a short silence while he waited unnecessarily for us to get settled. Maybe he was trying to settle himself as well. He placed his hands on the music stand in front of him and I drew in a breath. Here it was. Small talk always being unnecessary with Mr. Moore, he moved right to the point. “I’ve decided, after ten years with this program, to step down as director of Lafayette band.”

I wanted him to turn towards me and catch my eye. I was going to shake my head violently if he did, to convey to him with only that gesture that it was too soon for him to leave. That I only just got there and I had three more years. That I was learning to speak up and to

Speak out; that I was struggling horribly with geometry but was being tutored and I still wanted to do the best I could with that part of my life; that I used to always want to tight-roll my hair and put it in a pony tail with a ribbon like the cheerleaders, but now I had an album of pictures of me in a band hat for hours and I've never looked happier, or prettier. I wanted to stare him in the eyes and shake my head and make him know he made these things possible and if he left now, what would become of me, of all I was becoming?

He didn't look my way though, just continued to talk of fresh blood, and the excitement of change. Lafayette, he said, was still expected to uphold its fine traditions. When he finished he simply stepped off the podium, a cue that the meeting was over. There was a few seconds of hesitation before everyone began stirring about to get up, and then to leave as quietly as we came in. If anyone stayed to talk to him, I didn't see it. After he finished talking he disappears from my memory, probably because I lowered my head and simply walked out of the room, not speaking to anyone. I'm sure some seniors went up to him; they were leaving also so none of this made such a difference to them. I would say a lot of juniors hung back as well. Their last year would be marched under a new director, they, more than anyone else, would want to know why.

My mom was waiting for me in the car. "What was that about, honey?"

"Mr. Moore's quitting," I said flatly. Then, unable not to any longer, I began to cry.

Mr. Moore went on to serve as the Interim Director of Orchestras at the University of Kentucky and as the Conductor for the Central Kentucky Youth Orchestra. Eventually he earned that long postponed doctorate and became the Director of Bands at Colorado State University, where he remains today. His passion for music continued, that was something he couldn't walk away from. I think, though, that staying at Lafayette would've contradicted what he taught us.

He took the band to great heights and sustained them. There wasn't anything more, perhaps, that he could accomplish in being there, and in knowing that, he had to let Lafayette go, had to seek another challenge, another chapter. I believe the decision caused him great sadness. In every newsletter and every concert for the rest of the year, Mr. Moore said goodbye. He said goodbye to the parents, and the program, and over and over he said goodbye to the students. Sometimes the goodbye would be a subtle: a quick speech at the yearly band banquet thanking the parents for all the work they did during the time he was here. Other times the goodbye would be obvious: turning towards the audience during the last concert of the year and again announcing he was leaving, but then saying quiet words to the members of the symphonic band, words only they were privileged to hear. These were the best of Lafayette's musicians and they had committed themselves to the highest standards of music, just as Mr. Moore did. This earned them his private words of appreciation and, I believe now, of love.

My sophomore year I tried out for symphonic band—Lafayette's highest of its three concert bands. None of my friends tried out. Symphonic band met during sixth hour, while the other two concert bands met during fourth. Lunch times were decided by your fourth-period class, which meant my friends automatically had lunch together, and I, if I made symphonic band and thus had a different fourth period class, might not join them. I knew when I auditioned that I might have to eat lunch by myself if I made it, but I auditioned anyway. I was first chair in the middle band as a freshman; if I didn't try out for symphonic I wouldn't have any way to improve myself. I'd basically be musically stagnant for a year until my friends auditioned for symphonic band. It wasn't the best year socially for me, but I became a much better musician.

I didn't realize until after I graduated from high school that what I did my sophomore year is what Mr. Moore was doing when he left Lafayette. His influence, his inspiration, stayed with me even though he no longer could.

Take a Seat

At twelve I saw my life as an auditorium with a maximum seating capacity. There were permanent seats—Mom, Dad, sisters. And there were semi-permanent ones—next door neighbor, crush, best friend. Normally this rotation of people impacted me very little. Even when my elementary best friend, Laura, “dumped” me once we entered middle school I was hurt for about three days. Afterwards I set about finding a new best friend and adjusted to her quickly. The same couldn’t be said when my high school band director, Steve Moore, stepped down after my freshman year. Obviously, once my four-year stint in the band ended I’d have to say goodbye to Mr. Moore, but in my mind he sat in a permanent seat—that of my high school band director. He was one of the first people to inspire me, helping me see the art of music, pushing me to always excel on and off the band field, and making me realize the family that could exist in the people who wore the same uniform. I didn’t know how to include the people who once made up my life; I only knew how to replace them. Mr. Moore wasn’t somebody I was ready to replace.

I met Charles Smith, Mr. Moore’s successor, in the summer of 1996. (Although friends tell me the band actually met him the day Mr. Moore announced his leaving, months beforehand, I have no memory of this now or on that day in ‘96.) Usually the first day of band camp is a cacophony of sounds, with constant chatter of older members catching up and freshmen hesitantly introducing themselves, along with timid playing of instruments from those who never bothered practicing over the break and brash performances from others showing off their musical skills. But that year there was mostly silence; an odd, sad silence as we waited to meet the new band director. Lafayette’s band room, last renovated when the band held less than a hundred

members, was a cramped enclosure. Still, we sat closer to each other than necessary on the thin, gray carpet, taking comfort in the touching of elbows and ankles.

Mr. Smith came out of the office in the front of the room. Mr. Moore's office. A few weeks later I would be standing in that office, talking to Mr. Smith for some reason I've forgotten, and I'd notice a picture of Elizabethtown's marching band—his old band— hanging above his desk. By the end of the year Lafayette pictures would everywhere in that office, but at the start of that first fall he too was holding on, and missing the familiar. But when Mr. Smith first opened the door in late summer of 1996 I saw nothing of the office's interior, only the man coming out of it.

I was surprised by his physical appearance as he went to stand on the podium, a fixed and awkward smile on his face. I expected another Mr. Moore—slim and statuesque. Mr. Smith had a circular shaped head and larger than average belly. Although only slightly shorter than Mr. Moore at 5'9", his weight appeared to take off inches from his height. He wore a faded shirt and khaki shorts. I squeezed my girlfriend's arm, trying to convey to her my feelings of disbelief and disappointment. The whole situation was wrong. Mr. Moore didn't wear shorts, at least not that I ever remembered. Shorts suggested casual, and Mr. Moore was anything but. Only the year before the band had marched in a Disney World parade wearing its full uniform. The other bands played in t-shirts and cutoffs, their attire fitting for the Orlando sun in May; Lafayette sweated under wool pants and jackets. But under Mr. Moore the band was professional, and he presented us as such.

"I look forward to personally getting to know each and every one of you," Mr. Smith said. He took a deep breath, as if the worst was over, the first words were out, and maybe the rest would be easier. "It's gonna take me a while to match your name to your face. I ask that you be

patient with me.” He paused, scanning the room, looking almost as if he were taking a mental count. “There’s a lot of you.”

There were quick smiles in the room and Mr. Smith did the same, which caused his eyes to shine momentarily. I would come to learn Mr. Smith expressed his emotions through his eyes. When he was happy they seemed polished, and when he was mad the blue became dark and dull, his personal version of a shadow passing over the sun. In between were multiple shades, to match his multiple emotions. Mr. Moore’s eyes remained almost static, never a flash or a brightness coming across them; he let his voice reveal his emotions instead. Now Mr. Smith’s voice—.

“I’d like to go ahead and introduce you to people whose names I have learned,” he continued, sweeping his hand across the three girls that stood to his left—the drum majors. Though most of the band already knew the seniors, introducing them was a regular part of band camp.

“Over here, Mr. Smith said. “We have Stephanie”

Mr. Smith’s voice was deep and gravelly, making it seem, each time he spoke, as if it was the first time he was using his vocal chords that day. He clipped his words, so that even when he wasn’t, he sounded angry. I immediately missed the lull of Mr. Moore’s words—the way each one seemed to rise and fall before settling into you. Mr. Smith’s words came at you like rubber bouncing balls, hitting you quick right in the chest.

After introductions, the band walked outside and broke up. Upperclassmen went to one half of the field to review marching fundamentals that had gone rusty since last November; the freshmen took the other half to learn to practice the same fundamentals. I glanced over at the freshmen at one point—a group of about fifty kids. Their marching was awkward and unsure,

the beanies on their heads bulls' eyes of inexperience. Beyond even the beanies there was always an obvious division between band members for the first couple of weeks. Then, as the freshmen's marching became more fluid and their playing more confident, the band blended into one. But I believed then, that even when the freshmen's skills improved, we'd never be one band. The upperclassmen would always know Mr. Moore's direction first. The freshmen would never have it. In their mental auditorium, Mr. Smith sat securely in the high school band director's chair.

Though their appearance, dress, and mannerisms were very different, Mr. Smith and Mr. Moore had one very important characteristic in common—they were damn fine directors. Mr. Smith had come to us from Elizabethtown, Kentucky where he had been head director of Elizabethtown High School since 1989. Although Mr. Smith's band had about a hundred fewer members than Lafayette's, he had developed that band program. Only one year after Mr. Smith became director the Elizabethtown band was a finalist at the KMEA state marching band championship—an honor Lafayette was accustomed to. Like Mr. Moore, Mr. Smith held bragging rights for his band being named state champion in its class—and for repeating that victory. And like Mr. Moore, Mr. Smith did things his own way.

During the humid months Mr. Moore had allowed both the guys and the girls (provided they had on a sports bra) to take their shirts off during practice. A week into band camp with Mr. Smith, the shirts came back on.

Two weeks after that, he changed our mark time (i.e., marching in place as a way of internalizing the tempo). Before, with Mr. Moore, we placed the focus on a swift, sharp popping

out of each knee, with little emphasis on the heels. Mr. Smith wanted to emphasize the heels. His reasoning, I believe, was that when we lifted our heels it simulated marching more than standing still and moving only the knee.

Then, four days before our first contest, he made all drum major commands silent. The drum major's verbal command, ("mark-time, hut") given before the beginning of each song, instructed the band when to begin marching and playing. Mr. Smith thought the command was too obnoxious. In order for the whole band—spread out over an entire football field—to hear it, the drum major needed to shout. Often the words came out strained, and even cracked as the head drum major was a ninety-five pound female whose voice didn't carry far.

With each change came somewhat of an apology. Mr. Smith recognized there was nothing wrong with the old way, but he wanted to try something different. Different, not better, seemed to be the gist of the statements he was making. I didn't buy it.

During his exploitations of the first two changes I remained silent, just giving sideways glances to my girlfriends on the band field. Three strikes though, and Mr. Smith was out. As soon as I got home that day I dropped my backpack in the hallway and made a direct stomping path to the kitchen where my parents were cooking dinner. "Every time he makes a change he says something like 'Well now, I know this wasn't how it was done in the past' Right! And the past was obviously working for us! If it isn't broke, don't fix it. I mean, come on. What point is he trying to make?"

I was talking fast and gesturing wildly with my hands. Getting out all my anger and frustration felt good, and my parents stayed quiet until I had exhausted my emotions for the moment. Then my mom asked in a gentle voice if any of the new changes were improving the band.

Ten years later I can answer her question, knowing that the first two changes were just personal preferences. Mr. Smith didn't believe teenagers should be showing so much skin during practice. He also, as said, liked the look of the heels being raised during mark time, although it made no difference in our marching style. The latter had no effect on me, but honestly, I felt some relief when he told us we couldn't take off our shirts anymore. At fifteen, with no chest and no curves I felt inadequate next to some girls. Too many times I found myself noticing their ample chests, their recognizable hips and cute, flat stomachs and wishing that was me. Completely covered, I mostly forgot about it. But there was no admitting to my relief then, anymore than I could tell my mom that actually the silent command gave the band further professionalism (sort of like in Disney World, when we wore the full uniform). Besides the strained shouting of the drum major, the loud, verbal instructions took away from the atmosphere of the performance. In a way, it would be as if right before a Broadway show began, with the lights dimming and the curtain starting to pull back, the orchestra director in the pit tapped her baton and stated, "A one, and a two and," to get the orchestra to start playing. The audience, who would've been settling in their chairs, relaxed, would now be slightly startled. Not only that, but we became one of the few bands in our region to use the silent command.

But how to accept this at the time? The changes, however small, made it clear that Lafayette was becoming Mr. Smith's band. If I said yes to them I felt as if I were betraying Mr. Moore. I wasn't ready for that.

And I wasn't alone in this resistance.

I started hearing grumblings during breaks, beginning mostly with, "If Mr. Moore was here—" "Mr. Moore never—" "Mr. Moore used to—."

At first the attitude of the band seemed to grow lax. We didn't stop taking marching band seriously; we just started taking marching band less seriously. People walked back to their spots rather than ran. When at attention, everyone stood about an inch shorter, our backs hunched, our shoulders drooped. What once were silent rehearsals began to be filled with whispers. That's when Mr. Moore came back.

He appeared on a random day—practice wasn't going particularly well. Everyone just wanted to get out of there. The noise level on the field was probably at its highest ever when suddenly the talk became whispers that trailed off into a nervous silence. I looked around for a reason and saw him—standing on the sidelines, his black coat unbuttoned and billowing slightly at the bottom, his hands clasped loosely behind his back, his face angry and unflinching.

I smiled without meaning to. He's back, I thought. He's come to direct us again. Yet even in my sudden excitement I *knew* the real reason he was there—Mr. Smith had asked him to come. Days later, when this information was made known to us, nobody else seemed surprised by it either. Overall the band had been disregarding the authority of Mr. Smith, and if anyone could remind us about the importance of authority, it was Mr. Moore.

"This is not the behavior of Lafayette," Mr. Moore told us after rehearsal.

He had us seated on the blacktop around the fifty-yard line, Mr. Smith standing behind and slightly to the left of him. I found when I closed my left eye Mr. Smith disappeared entirely from my view. I kept it closed briefly and asked silently, to no one in particular, if my altered vision could come to pass.

"You're disrespecting the very name of Lafayette," Mr. Moore continued. He spoke in a low, controlled voice. "You're disrespecting Mr. Smith."

Here, for some reason, I expected him to look to Mr. Smith and for Mr. Smith to step forward, to start talking himself. But Mr. Smith didn't move. Nobody moved. Even Mr. Moore who often walked around while he talked to us, or gestured in slow, grand movements with his arms remained still. Both directors just stood there, looking out over us. "You're disrespecting yourselves," Mr. Moore said. "I expected more."

I bowed my head, and staring at a flattened piece of gum on the blacktop, continued my silent request. I told Mr. Moore that if only he'd come back things would change, be like they were before. But it was the words a director said that should have been enough, not the person speaking them. I, all of us, should have accepted what was before us; old director or new director, shirts on or off, we remained Lafayette band, and that required a high amount of dedication and respect that we weren't giving.

If Mr. Moore stuck around that day I don't remember; he just seemed to disappear and slip back into a reality we couldn't follow. With his departure the impact of his words faded. Discipline and desire, and the acceptance of change—these, we were going to have to learn the hard way.

The hard way came with a loss.

Lafayette didn't always come in first. In the past ten years though, (and probably in years prior to that), Lafayette never lost a Kentucky contest. Until, that is, the Boyle County Invitational in 1996.

"Mercer County's here again tonight," Mr. Smith told us. We were in warm-ups, standing in a huge circle at the back of Boyle County High School. Darkness had already settled

in on that early October evening, and Mr. Smith, standing inside that circle pacing slowly, was little more than an outline.

Mercer County was about forty minutes from Lexington. Although Mercer County's high school only had a 2A band (compared to Lafayette's 4A), its band had the talent and the trophies to claim to be one of the state's best. The previous week we marched against Mercer County and ended up winning by only five-tenths.

After a competition Mr. Moore didn't tell us scores. In his vision the point was the performance, scores were secondary. Mr. Smith wasn't much of a score keeper either. In my three years he probably brought up numbers two or three times and then only to give us a reality check. Always it was followed with some version of the lines, "You may have won, but that win isn't going to sustain you for the season." Of course, I didn't believe that at the time, and only saw his reference to score as another way he and Mr. Moore were different, another change I was unwilling to accept.

To no one's surprise, our performance that night was half-hearted. Because we were unwilling to get behind our director, there was no way we could get behind our show. Our passion was gone. What did come as a surprise though, was that after winning Outstanding Music, Effect, and Visual, Lafayette came in second . . . to Mercer County.

We remained standing at attention around the track as their whole band—all forty members—ran out and collected the trophy, forming a circle and jumping up and down. I can still see the white capes of their uniforms flapping with each lift into the air, the trophy raised above their heads and their fingers pointing to the sky—we're number one.

After I was able to close my mouth and begin taking breaths again I thought to myself: this would've never happened if Mr. Moore was director. Then I thought about quitting, and not for the first time.

Mr. Smith walked slowly, but with determination out in front of us, diverting our eyes from Mercer County's celebration. He lifted his chin as if reminding himself to hold his head high during this. "Relax," he told us in a voice that almost sounded relieved. Later he would tell us he was thankful for the loss. Having it early the way we did helped us survive it, and go on to focus on the rest of the season. "Mercer County's gonna perform and encore, and we're gonna stay and watch."

I bowed my head and muffled a groan. As if it wasn't enough to lose, now we had to stay and get it rubbed in our faces. Again, the thought came to me: Mr. Moore never would've made us . . . but then I stopped. Even in my state of anger and denial, I couldn't convince myself of that. Bands of America has a tradition that after the awards have been given out, all the bands that made it to the finals have the opportunity to stay on the field and congratulate one another. Before our first BOA my freshman year Mr. Moore said to us that he didn't care what place we got, but that afterwards we were to make sure to find one member of every band and shake his or her hand. "If they got that far," he said, "they deserve your respect and congratulations."

Lafayette band walked around the track and stood against the fence that separated the track from the bleachers. I shivered from the chill of the October air; the chill I never felt when performing; the chill I'm sure I would not have felt had Lafayette won. I forced myself to watch Mercer County's performance. My anger dissipated in those fifteen minutes, replaced by a hollow ache in the middle of my chest. I wanted to be out there performing. Maybe if we had tried a little harder and listened to and accepted Mr. Smith's suggestions and leadership, it would

be us under those lights, doing an encore. And, maybe, an annoying voice said in my head, no matter the director, Mercer County was just better that night. Mr. Moore would have made us stay and watch as well.

Once the encore finished Lafayette started for the buses to go home, but Mr. Smith redirected us. He took us back to Boyle County's gym where we got dressed in our uniforms earlier.

"Close your eyes," he instructed us as we settled ourselves on the floor. He kept his voice steady as he talked about the performance. I waited to hear words like, *disappointed*, or *frustrated*, but he only spoke of ways we could improve. Then there was a long pause, so long that I almost opened my eyes before Mr. Smith began again. "Tomorrow's a new day for the Lafayette band. You're not going to be able to scare me away with a loss . . . I'm starting to fall in love with the Lafayette band."

That time I did open my eyes and lift up my head, as many around me did. What? Did he just say he loved us? I couldn't believe it. Yes, the freshmen liked him, but among the upperclassmen, nobody stuck around to talk to him after band, his office, at this point, still lacked the kinds of pictures and cards that had hung in Mr. Moore's office, even some of the parents were questioning his decisions. And yet, despite this, he was falling in love. He was opening himself up to us in a way that we still weren't to him.

"I'm looking forward to the rest of the season," he told us, his eyes a faint but shimmering blue.

My parents were waiting for me in the parking lot of Lafayette when the buses pulled in.

“Tough loss, huh kid?” my mom asked, putting her arm around me.

I shrugged. The loss seemed far away by then, trivial really, to the realizations that followed it—were following it. I had yet to digest what had happened between watching Mercer County perform and sitting in that gym until Mr. Smith finished speaking to us.

“You think maybe you guys need that?” my dad asked. “A kind of a wake-up call?”

“Maybe,” I said slowly. “I guess we’ll see what happens on Monday.”

Practice that Monday was silent. Maybe people were still a little dumbstruck from Mr. Smith’s confession. Or maybe they wanted to see what this man could do if we shut up and listened. If they were like me, it was some of both.

Mr. Smith said it himself: he wasn’t going anywhere. And when we finally boarded the buses home Saturday night I decided I wasn’t either. I realized (for neither the first time, nor the last), while sitting cross-legged on the gym floor, close enough that my knees touched knees of those on either side of me, and their knees touched other knees, sharing in the let-down of a loss, that I too was in love with the Lafayette band. But it wasn’t the same Lafayette band I loved before. This was a different year, with different students, different contests, different outcomes, and a different director. Mr. Smith was a part of the band I now loved. If I could love this new band without negating the love I had for the old band, couldn’t I in turn think of Mr. Smith as my band director just as I still did Mr. Moore? I didn’t think I’d ever care for him the way I did for Mr. Moore, but Monday afternoon I willingly surrendered myself to his leadership.

Two weeks later—with our new attitude adjustment still in progress—Mr. Smith lead us to a Bands of America championship (something that we didn’t accomplish with Mr. Moore). A week after that we claimed our seventh state championship.

[section break]

At twelve, after Laura, when I was searching for a new best friend, I found Shauna. Thirteen years later, Shauna is still one of my best friends, although in all that time there have been others I have been closer to at certain points. The months of silence, or brief, vague conversations while Shauna was off in Italy and while I was finding a new boyfriend didn't take away from what we had.

With time I recognized that my life's auditorium doesn't have a maximum seating capacity. As things changed and new people came into my life I didn't keep the same number of chairs and get rid of the old people. I just continued making a new front row.

On an October night, when I was fifteen years old, I added a chair, and invited Mr. Smith to sit down.

Fuck North Hardin

Marching band practice on Shively field—located on the University of Kentucky campus—only happened twice a year. These practices usually occurred before a big contest, such as Bands of America, in which bands from across the nation came to compete, or the Kentucky Music Educators Association (KMEA) state championship, which Lafayette High School won eight straight times heading into my senior year. Contests, in other words, where stakes were raised and performances needed to be tighter, cleaner, and more intense in order to have any opportunity to be recognized as one of the best bands, much less the best one. Preparing for such serious competitions, Lafayette practiced on a serious field.

Lafayette's own "field" was a blacktop parking lot behind school. Practice could begin only after all the buses left, and often our concentration was interrupted by a misaimed soccer ball that came soaring over the fence to the right of us where soccer players ran drills on newly lined grass. But Shively encompassed all the elements of a competition. It wasn't behind any building at the university, surrounded by parked cars and a football team practicing twenty feet away. Shively was set apart, a stage unto itself. Where our feet were accustomed to marching over pavement, it had Astroturf; where the setting sun determined the end of our practices, now there were stadium lights; and where we were left to imagine a judges' box whenever we popped our horns in the air, Shively included one in its stands. At Shively we never seemed to be practicing for one competition or another; we were competing.

Because our time at Shively carried more weight and significance than most after-school rehearsals, the seniors always called a meeting of the whole band beforehand. The band arrived early and went to a patch of grass in the corner of the parking lot. Some of us sat while the rest

stood, listening in silence as a select few seniors—with Shively field looming directly behind them, setting up a backdrop—talked to us about the importance of this day, the upcoming competition and the band as a whole. I’m a sucker for motivational speeches. I see them as a form of philosophy. Instead of sitting in a classroom debating the meaning of life or pondering what happens after death, motivational speeches are a call for action; a challenge to do something, change something, fight for something, right this very moment. The possibility behind the words made me feel charged. Each year, with my knees close to my chest as we crowded together on the grass, and the early October air causing my skin to break out in goose bumps, I listened to a new senior, a new leader talk. Each year, I wished it were me up there energizing and empowering everyone with my words. For three years as Shively approached I made up speeches in my head, imagining the reactions of others if my words were spoken aloud. As the summer of 1998 came to a close and I found myself in that coveted position of senior, I didn’t think my words would be heard though. Ultimately, I was too shy to speak them.

My shyness was complex. Around friends and family I was on the extreme end of extrovert. I loved to quote movies and tell exaggerated stories of the day’s events. I laughed at myself even when no one else joined in. My sisters and I spent afternoons putting on skits for my aunts and uncles. Any time my grandfather got out his video camera I’d elbow and tickle my sisters to get some face time. But whenever strangers came into the equation, even around my family and friends, the loud, brash, goofy part of me vanished.

Each time my dad’s college friends came over, I shut myself in my room. If Mom gave us money to go to see a movie, I’d give mine to my older sister, Jennifer, and ask in a whisper if she’d buy my ticket. Even around peers and acquaintances, when put in the spotlight, I was

uncomfortable. When my teacher called on me to read aloud, I'd turn red and fumble over the words. Once, during a soccer game, I was picked as one of the players to participate in a shoot out (which happens when the game ends in a tie and five players on each team individually take a shot at the opposing goalie). Out there alone on the field, painfully aware of the eyes of the audience on me, I panicked and kicked the ball directly to the goalie.

With time, my shyness toned down. For instance, my whole body shook and I stared at the carpet the entire time I gave my presentation on Aphrodite in seventh grade English class. But by tenth grade English only my hands shook while I flipped notes cards during my speech on why athletes should be drug tested; I was even able to look up from time to time, although I glanced only at the back wall. Yet still as a teenager I was content to let others do the social leading. Once, when I was sixteen, a long-time friend of the family's, my sister's godfather, dropped by. I was the only one at home and upon seeing his black Ford truck turn into our gravel driveway, I groaned out loud. I didn't have the experience to even begin to hold a one-on-one conversation with this man. I invited him in anyway and after about ten minutes of awkward small talk, my sister Jennifer came home. I was instantly relieved, knowing Jennifer would gladly talk to him—which she did—and I could use homework as an excuse to slip away. Which, of course, I did.

Perhaps college would have forced me to face my timid nature more head on. Or perhaps I might not have become more confident and sure in my actions and voice until my first job. Possibly even then I could have found ways to hide behind others, so much so that I never would have left Kentucky. That may be extreme, for I'd like to think that sooner or later I would overcome the bashful part of me that left me unable to do so much. I didn't have to wait to test

myself though. In the summer of 1998, I became a section leader for my high school marching band.

I walked into Lafayette's cafeteria in late July. Immediately the sweat, which had caused my multi-colored tank top to cling to my skin, began to cool from the blast of the school's air conditioning. Charles Smith, Lafayette's band director, called a section leader meeting and set up a semi-circle of chairs facing the neon painted sports murals that decorated one side of the cafeteria wall. I remember studying the murals closely as I took a seat, thinking to myself how I hadn't paid much attention to them before. Now, there was a year left to sit in this place and eat lunch with my friends before going off on different paths, so I needed to notice—everything. I needed to remember the exact color of blue painted on the lockers lining every hallway. Those lockers where my girlfriends and I hung around each morning before the bell, taping up the latest group picture on the inside and writing secret jokes on the outside, laughing about how we'd come back years later to read them all over again. I wanted to breathe in the stuffy, formaldehyde aroma of the science wing, where in its classrooms I fought the urge to both vomit and cry as I dissected a baby pig and a year later stood up to my chemistry teacher when I disagreed with the grade she gave me. I needed to memorize the feel of the cracked auditorium stage beneath my feet and the bright, naked glare of the spotlight warming my face as I danced around and sang in the variety show—my first time on stage since I ran off in fear when I was five. I needed to do as much as I could. This year was the time for that, to take down and get done what I hadn't before. I didn't know what I was asking for.

There were around fourteen section leaders—some of the bigger sections having two—and all the top players in our instruments and only one of us who wasn't a senior. We had each

had different section leaders throughout our years with the band but Mr. Smith went into the expectations of them just the same. Section leaders are like mini directors. They help with marching fundamentals, teach freshmen how to read drill charts, and are in charge of running sectionals. What Mr. Smith didn't say, but we all knew anyway, was that section leaders were the ones to call any meeting, they were the ones to speak at Shively.

The upcoming marching band season always made me giddy. But that year, to be in the coveted position of senior, and on top of that, to be recognized as one of the bands best, to be a section leader, left me unable to think about anything else. I talked about band at the dinner table, I lay in bed at night and imagined what our new drill would look like, and I even pulled out my old band tapes and watched them. This eagerness lasted from the meeting on Friday until the first day of band camp on Monday, when I found myself standing in front of forty flute players, expectantly waiting for me to lead them in marching drills.

For some reason or another, call it temporary insanity, I felt because I had been in marching band for three years and watched others do it before me, that I'd have no problem taking charge. But I hated public speaking, and that didn't change simply because I was a good flute player and an expert at seeing others talk to a crowd. That was like saying I could suddenly do a triple axial because I watched an ice skating competition on TV.

"H-hi everyone. For those of you that don't know me, I'm Grace," I told the group of almost all females. I rubbed sweat from the back of my neck. The heat wasn't getting to me as much as their eyes on me. I was looking at the blacktop, but I felt them watching me just the same. "I'm a senior this year. I play the. . . ." I stopped. I almost told the flute section that I played the flute. I swallowed hard. "I've been playing for seven years now. Umm. . . ." The conversation was going nowhere. I looked around—spread out over the practice field most other

section leaders were running marching drills already. I swallowed again. “Okay, let’s do some box eights.” I paused, almost waiting for someone to tell me no, to laugh, to call me out as a phony. I caught the eye of my friend Sarah, a senior herself. She gave me a slight nod. “Right,” I said, forcing myself to talk louder in hopes I sounded more confident. “Here we go”

At lunch, feeling defeated, I barely talked to my friends, and by the end of the day I was wracking my brain for reasons I could step down. “Just tell Mr. Smith you’re gonna have too much homework this year to really focus on being a section leader.” I was walking in a circle around the blue and white oval rug in the living room, mumbling to myself. “Remind him that you still haven’t decided on a college and that’s your number one concern right now.” I walked around, letting my feet only touch the blue part, then I’d do it again, being careful to stay in the white. Over and over, my steps getting faster as the ovals got smaller. “Recommend that April be section leader. He loves her.” April was a junior and there was no doubt she would be section leader the following year, being one of the top players in the band, by far the best in her class. Plus she was the overly determined, overly eager type, which could be slightly annoying, but made me think she would have no problem stepping up and taking over my position. I stopped circling and turned toward the mantle, catching my reflection in the glass of one of the pictures hanging there.

“Mr. Smith,” I rehearsed. “I really appreciate being given the opportunity to be section leader. But I’m really not sure I can give it 100% of me, what with the ACTs and college visits and all—my mind’s gonna be elsewhere. But I know April’s interested in doing it. And just think about how much stronger the flute section will be next year with April as its leader again. She’ll already have a year under her belt. So what do you say?” I smiled at myself, but even that wasn’t convincing.

Oh, there was no way he'd go for it. Already the trombone section leader asked if it was all right for another person to be co-section leader and Mr. Smith said no. It seemed impossible then, that he was going to let someone new come in. I fell onto the couch. *What am I going to do?*

Since in-class presentations began around the time I entered sixth grade, I always got through them by telling myself it was no more than ten minutes. Standing in front of my peers, the heat creeping up in my cheeks, and fighting to keep my voice from stuttering, I knew there was an end. And when that end came, I could go back to my seat and blend right back into the classroom. But being section leader was like a continuous class presentation. Each day I stood in front of others and went over flute positions, or fingering, or the art of backwards marching. There was never a last page that let me sit back down afterwards. Even when the band came together Mr. Smith called upon section leaders.

In Lafayette's 1998 Marching Band Show, there was singing. It only lasted about four bars, but because it was such a rarity in marching bands (Lafayette only did it once before in 1994, the year before I came) that many of the band's members were hesitant to project. One rehearsal, after going over the singing again and again Mr. Smith grew frustrated.

"All right," he spat into the microphone as he watched us from the band tower. "This time I only want section leaders to sing. The rest of you stay silent and listen to how it should be done."

A jolt went through me. There was no way I could do that. There were over 200 people in the band, and only fourteen of us would be singing. To have that many people listen to my mediocre voice made my throat automatically tighten. Sure, we were only singing notes without

words. Words would've been harder, as if all the band had crowded into my room while I sang in front of the mirror with my bottle of hair mousse when I knew my sisters weren't home.

Embarrassing. Singing notes, I tried to convince myself in those anxious few seconds before we began, was really no different than humming, or whistling. Plenty of people had heard me do that. My throat did not relax however; it seemed to have a rope wrapped around it that I was psychologically hanging myself with.

We ran through it once, my own singing barely above a whisper. I was ashamed, knowing that only the day before I snapped at the younger flute players for singing too softly.

"Great," Mr. Smith called out. "Did you all hear that? If fewer than twenty people can produce that much volume then I expect a great deal more out of the rest of the band. Now, I'm gonna have the section leaders do it one more time. Everybody listen! You're gonna have to be fifty times louder than them the next time around. Section leaders, ready?"

I closed my eyes. I knew then that until marching band season was over, situations like this weren't going to stop. Already, section leaders marched fundamentals for the band so Mr. Smith could point out toe-lift and shoulder positions. Now we were singing, and no doubt we'd be asked to play parts of the show, next week, or the week after. It would happen. And the whole band would still be watching. Plus we continued to be in charge of running music and marching drills of our own with our section. I wanted the attention to be over, but I didn't want marching band to be. There were a few competitions left and then my time in the band was through. I wasn't ready to give that up yet. That didn't leave me with many options.

Forget it, I thought. I'll just pretend I'm in the shower. I opened my throat and sang out the notes. I didn't open my eyes, but I projected. My voice wavered but I hoped that those

around me thought I was using vibrato. And six seconds later, when it was over, I hadn't fainted in shame.

Since that time, I've been required to be even bolder. I've confronted people whom I found were spreading rumors about me. I've told a man I loved him unsure if he felt the same way. I moved 800 miles away from my family to a city where I didn't know a soul. But at seventeen, singing, uninhibited to a large crowd in my semi off-key voice was the gutsiest thing I had done to date. Being section leader, forced to face my shyness head-on for the past few months, gave me the confidence to sing. And singing would give me further confidence for what I was about to do two weeks later.

By my junior year North Hardin was the up and coming powerhouse band in Kentucky. Located in western Kentucky, North Hardin's band had always just been within reach of being the best without actually grabbing onto it. They made it to the state championship competition for years but never got past third. By 1997 they hit their stride and Lafayette ended up beating them by only one-tenth of a point. The way too close for comfort win hadn't left anyone's memory. Right from the beginning of my senior year North Hardin was the school everyone at Lafayette was talking about. We started worrying less about our own show and more about what North Hardin was doing.

I admit they were on my mind a lot as well, despite the numerous times I reminded myself to focus on Lafayette. You can only worry about your band, your show. The attention we were giving, at least in thought, to North Hardin reached its peak a week before the state championships—the week the band went to Shively.

[section break]

The weather that fall had stayed on the edge of cool and when I parked in the lot behind Shively I tied my jacket around my waist. I knew I'd only need it once the sun went down. As usual the band had gathered in the far corner, the freshman and sophomores taking a seat on the little grass that there was. I stood off to the right, psyching myself up to talk. Standing in front of audiences was easier since becoming a section leader, and singing definitely shriveled my timid side. But this was Shively, a place and moment that I built up over the years. And this was the whole band, not spread out over the field, but together, a collective unit of eyes hoping for inspiration.

One section leader spoke, then another. No more than four or five people ever talked. There wasn't enough time and after a while, all the messages started to sound the same. I walked up to one of the drum majors. "I want to say something," I whispered to her.

She nodded and told me I was next.

Next. I had written down some of the things I wanted to say and I pulled the paper out of my back pocket quickly and scanned it, reading but not comprehending the words. I took a step back, cramps coming to my stomach. This, I decided, bent over slightly, was a sign I shouldn't talk. Folding the paper I tried catching the drum major's eye, hoping I could tell her I changed my mind. Shively was too important. I knew I'd get up there and freeze. I couldn't talk to a group of hundreds and move them with a speech written in fragments. How could I make them feel the love and passion and devotion I had for this band when I could barely stand in front of forty flutes and lead them in drills I could do in my sleep? *But the singing.*

There was quiet again and the drum major nodded to me, the people standing nearby moving aside so I could get through. I hesitated before stepping forward. Then I was before the

band and I stood there looking out into the parking lot, my fingers fiddling with the jacket around my waist before I clasped them together.

“There are always two choices,” I started, each word feeling like a brick on my tongue. “Two paths to take. One is easy. And it’s only reward is that it’s easy.” I paused. I was supposed to follow up with something about giving everything we could and leaving nothing on the band field. But I did freeze and couldn’t remember the exact words. For a brief, panic-stricken moment I thought—*get your paper*. I didn’t want to have to pause any longer to get it though, and I was afraid my sweaty hands might not hold onto it. More than that though, the idea suddenly seemed ridiculous, too rehearsed. So I said the first thing that came to my mind.

“You know what? Fuck North Hardin!”

There were a few seconds of silence, of disbelief, before the band started laughing and clapping. I hesitated myself before joining in. “No really,” I said, my voice growing more determined. “Fuck them!” The band howled some more. Today I’m called Popeye by my closest friends because of my apparent sailor’s mouth. But in high school the extent of my cussing consisted of *shit* and *damn*, and even those were mostly spoken in my head. The unexpected use of *fuck*, I imagine, delightfully shocked everyone.

“I don’t give a shit about them,” I continued over the cheering. “I don’t give a shit about any other band that might be at state. Fuck’em!! This time is about us, this band, this moment.” I was walking back and forth as I talked. The realization struck me, even as I spoke, that the speech was almost too perfect—the execution, the response—if a slight breeze had run through my hair and a soft melody had begun it most definitely would’ve belonged in an after school special. But it was real. My own philosophy.

“After next week, it’s all gonna be over. And let me tell you underclassmen something—when you get to this moment here, when everything becomes numbered and there are no more second chances, you realize just how precious it all is. There’s always gonna be some hotshot band out there. Always! But there’s no point spending any time you have with this band here, worrying about them. . . .”

The words were becoming heavy again, but not out of fear or shyness—rather from tears. Band had become like the neon murals on the cafeteria wall, something that had always been right in front of me, a part of me, that I noticed without fully absorbing. And although I had taken it in more than any other aspect of high school, soon it too would be taken from me.

I smiled. “Fuck North Hardin.” It was a whisper, but everyone heard it and began clapping again.

The next day at school my sister, Olivia, came up to me after first hour. “Grace, what did you say last night?” she asked me.

“Why? What do you mean?”

“People in my German class wouldn’t stop talking about. They kept coming up to me and saying ‘You should’a heard her speech.’”

I smiled in surprise. “Oh, really? Well, you know. Nothing much. Just the f-word here and there.”

Later while doing homework around the dining room table Olivia was telling my mom about it when my other sister, Kimberly, joined in. “Oh yeah? People were telling me about that today too.”

“Nu uh,” I said. “Wow.”

My mom looked at me surprised. “Who is this daughter of mine? I thought you were too shy to speak in public?”

I blushed and went back to my math problems. “Can’t people change?”

Lafayette won state again that year, and by a bigger margin than one-tenth. Nine months later I left for college. I opted to go seventy-three miles away instead of to the University of Kentucky three miles down the road. Even attending a Kentucky school, I knew only one other person going there. The week before classes started I met two roommates who were also in the college band. We chatted for a while, but they walked to their dorm without me. My own roommate went back home so I had no one to eat dinner with. I found the girls’ room and stood outside their door, unable to will myself to knock and ask them if they wanted to join me for dinner. Long seconds passed with me shifting my weight from one foot to the other in the hall. Somewhere I was waiting for my shyness to get bored and leave, but I was beginning to understand, and what I now fully realize is that I haven’t gotten rid of my shyness; I just continue to push past it. Some times are easier than others; all times it’s a personal battle. But I no longer excuse myself from a room and hide inside it.

Finally I knew I either had to knock or eat alone, so I called to mind what would become my mantra for many years to come:

“Fuck North Hardin,” I said to myself, and knocked on the door.

Vita

Grace Owen grew up in Lexington, Kentucky and received her B.A. in English and Philosophy from Morehead State University. She moved to New Orleans in the summer of 2004 to pursue a degree in creative writing. After a brief hiatus from the city due to Hurricane Katrina, (where she moved back home and learned to appreciate Kentucky bourbon and snow at Christmas), she returned to finish up her masters, and teach English Composition. She continues to live there with her boyfriend and their many, many cats.